

Hello Dolly

Growing up in the late 1930s

Fall River, Massachusetts

Dolly Bentson

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By Dolly Bentson

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Front Cover: Mary, Dolly (back row)

Teresa, Rita (middle row)

Larry (front row)

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For Mama and Papa
Agnes and Joseph Silva



July 1930

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Prologue

When you are the third child and first daughter in a family of ten children, you straddle the dual roles of fairy princess and scullery maid. One day you are seven, beautifully attired in your First Communion dress and veil, holding Papa's hand. You proudly walk through the neighborhood to visit the relatives, and graciously accept their folded dollar bills slipped into your gloved hand.

And then you are twelve, walking these same streets, only now your hands hold a brown paper bag with a skittish chicken inside that somehow senses its imminent beheading.

I invite you to enjoy these and other experiences which make up my life stories. Some names have been changed, and I have taken a writer's liberty of altering some details, but the stories are true. What follows are memories of a happy childhood in a loving Portuguese family in Fall River, Massachusetts, in the late 1930s. I wouldn't have wanted to miss any of it.

Welcome to my world where Portuguese is sometimes spoken and Papa wisely acknowledges that Mama knows best.



1945

Hello Dolly



In the drafty second floor apartment of a tenement building at 131 Division Street, twenty-eight year old Agnes begins her labor. She tosses on the bed and prays that this delivery will fare better than the last one. It is 1937 and families in Fall River, Massachusetts, feel the hardships of the Depression. There is no money for hospitals, so this baby, like the miscarried twins two years ago, will be born at home.

Two small boys, their dark eyes large with fright, peer from their bedroom. Papa is too preoccupied to notice his sons. He gazes out the window, lost in thought. Gustly winds swirl dust and litter in the air then settle them down like playful children in a game of Ring-Around-Rosie. This is not what Joe envisioned when he left the Azores Islands in Portugal with his family and came to America as a boy of eleven. His parents were told the streets were paved with gold, but that has not been his experience.

Where are Doctor Costa and his nurse? The sky darkens. Shadowy figures hunker down in their coats and hurry from the neighborhood grocery store with last minute turkeys and cranberry sauce. The barroom downstairs seems exceptionally noisy this evening, and Papa questions his judgment in moving his family to a tenement over a barroom because of the cheaper rent.

On this Thanksgiving eve Joe ponders these things in his heart. Will there be cause for thanksgiving before this night is over? His mind strays to the sorrow of that earlier loss and, against his will, tears fill his eyes.

He brushes them away with the back of his hand. He won't allow himself to think of the past.

"Joe, it's coming," gasps Agnes, startling him from his desperate thoughts. With a deep moan that fills the room, Agnes tosses and groans. George, age six, and Junior, four and a half, scurry to hide in the closet. The floor vibrates with the pounding piano music from the downstairs bar, but the noise doesn't muffle Mama's cries.

"Do you think Mama is dying?" Junior asks George. His lips quiver and his body shudders. "I don't know," whispers George, and he wraps his arm around his brother's trembling shoulders. Huddled in the dark, they listen. They hear a knock and Papa hurrying to open the kitchen door.

Someone with a gruff voice and sounding out of breath bursts into the kitchen firing questions. Junior turns his head so that his mouth is close to George's ear and whispers, "Who is that?" George shifts his position to get a better view. "It looks like Doctor Costa and his nurse," he says. George recognizes the doctor who came to the house a year ago when he was sick with a high fever. That can only mean Mama is seriously ill. George hides his fears in the darkness. He tries to be brave for his younger brother.

They hear murmuring voices, water splashing and hurried footsteps. All of a sudden Mama lets out an awful howl, and then it gets very quiet. There is a slap, the wailing cry of a baby and Dr. Costa's booming voice saying, "This young lady was waiting for no one. Congratulations." Then the crying stops and all is still.

A few moments later, Mama's bedroom door opens, and the boys hear Papa thanking Doctor Costa and his nurse. Papa sees them out, and after they leave he walks towards the boys' room. He calls to them, but they are afraid to move. His footsteps come closer, and he opens the closet door.

"Ah, there you are, you little rascals. Come and see what Mama has for you." George notices tears in Papa's blue eyes but hears happiness in his voice. Papa urges them on with a laugh, "Come, come." He guides them into the other bedroom with a gentle pressure of his hands on their shoulders.

The bedroom smells like frozen towels drying on radiators. Mama sits up in bed. She looks tired, but she isn't dead. Damp black hair is plastered around her pale face, and the boys see smiling brown eyes because she isn't wearing her glasses. Her plump arms hold a tiny bundle close to her breast. Little pink toes poke through the bottom of the thin flannel blanket. "Happy Thanksgiving," Mama says. "You have a strong and healthy baby sister."

Joe watches his beaming wife and glances with love at the noisily suckling baby. He draws the boys closer to the bed. With one arm around them and the other

around Mama, he says, “Yes, it truly is a happy Thanksgiving, isn’t it? I’m going to call my brother Manny in the morning and ask him and Mimi to be godparents.”

When Papa and his younger brother Manny were teenagers, they owned an old car together. In Papa’s stories he called it his jalopy. Whenever they saved enough money for gas, they would drive from Connecticut to Fall River, and that’s where Papa met Mama. Could that be why Papa wants Uncle Manny to be godfather to his first daughter?

It is a few weeks later and Uncle Manny and his wife Mimi arrive from Connecticut for the baptism. George and Junior have been waiting by the window, and when they hear a car door slam, they jump up and down with excitement.

“There’s a beautiful black car parked below,” George says. “Uncle Manny doesn’t drive a jalopy any more.”

Trudging footsteps come up the stairs, and then the kitchen door flies open. Uncle Manny and Aunt Mimi stand in the entryway to remove their overshoes and brush snow from their coats. The smell of stale beer wafts up the stairwell from the barroom below. Papa quickly ushers them in, hoping they won’t notice. If they do, they’re too polite to mention it.

Uncle Manny and Papa hug one another and pat their shoulders. The tiny apartment feels smaller and noisier with everyone crowded in the same space. Both brothers are short, but Uncle Manny is wiry and seems taller in his fine clothes. Papa’s muscled arms make him seem more solid. With their heads close together you can see they have the same black wavy hair, but Papa sports a thin mustache.

“Hey, Joe. Where is this pretty Irish colleen with the blue eyes and black hair I’ve been hearing about?” Uncle Manny teases Papa affectionately as he bounces on his feet and looks around for Mama and the baby. He moves like a dancer and has a voice like music. “I thought this was a Portuguese family.”

“Hold your horses,” Papa says, “Agnes is getting the baby ready to meet her godfather and godmother. And there’s nothing Irish about this baby other than her coloring. She’s all Portuguese.”

Aunt Mimi stands by, quietly amused. Wisps of blonde hair fly around her face when she removes her silky scarf. It slides to the floor, and golden curls spring on the fur collar of her coat. George stoops to pick up the scarf.

“Oh what a fine gentleman you are,” she says. She reaches for the scarf and thanks him with a hug. Later, George will tell Junior that she smelled like flowers

and fresh snow all mixed together. Now Uncle Manny rubs his hands and paces about in the tiny room.

“Agnes, where are you hiding my godchild?” he calls towards the bedroom door. I want to get a close look at this Irish beauty.”

“What are you talking about?” Papa says “She’s a Portuguese beauty.”

Papa swaggers up close to his brother’s face and widens his sea-blue eyes.

“You see these eyes? Hers are just like her Papa’s.” Uncle Manny laughs and everybody joins in.

“How about I put on a pot of coffee to warm everybody up,” Papa suggests. Uncle Manny says, “Good idea. That should go perfectly with the fresh *massa* we picked up at the Portuguese bakery. I have to come to Fall River to get that delicious sweet bread.”

As if on cue, Mama enters the kitchen with the baby. The boys are surprised to see red lipstick when Mama smiles. And her hair is brushed back neatly. That must be what took her so long. Mama holds out the baby to Uncle Manny then tugs at her housedress which pulls snugly around her belly. He draws the wrapped baby close and brushes her cheek with feathery fingers. The boys notice a gold ring with a sparkling white stone on his pinky finger. Just then the baby opens her eyes and smiles. “What a little doll you are,” he croons. Her rosy cheeks, black lashes and blue eyes charm Uncle Manny who proclaims, “Hello, Dolly. That’s who you are, my little Dolly.”

As simply as that, I am named. The baptism records show Ines Moniz Silva, Ines being the Portuguese spelling of Mama’s name, and Moniz her maiden name. Though I will be called Ines in church and later in school, at home I will hear only my special name, Dolly.

262 Division Street

The following year, our family of five moves up the hill to 262 Division Street, a three-flat tenement house on the corner of Diman and Division. We live on the first floor which feels spacious with two bedrooms off a large kitchen, a pantry to one side and full bathroom on the other, and a parlor with a front parlor entry. Stairs from the entry go up to the second floor tenement, but that is rented out and we children are not allowed there. There is a hard-packed dirt cellar downstairs, three attic rooms on the top floor and a big yard. Best of all, we own the house. That is, the bank owns it, but Mama and Papa hold the mortgage papers and collect the rents from the tenants on the second and third floors.

“At last my children have a safe yard to play in, and I don’t have to protect their ears from the rough language of those drunkards,” Papa says to Mama one afternoon, sounding pleased with himself. He glances outdoors at the fenced yard where George and Junior play.

“And the boys can walk to school and get a good education,” Mama adds. She sits and listens while sewing curtains for the bedrooms. Soon enough, cold winds will find every crack in the wooden frames of the old storm windows. She smiles at Papa who turns from the window to share more of his thoughts.

“And another thing. This year I’ll plant a small garden, build a chicken coop and get some laying hens for fresh eggs.” As Papa warms to his subject, he paces around the kitchen. “I always say that if a person is willing to work hard and make sacrifices, he can get ahead.” Papa comes close to Mama and kisses the top of her head gently, so he won’t disturb her sewing. Mama reaches up to touch Papa’s hand. I lie quietly in my crib lulled by the sound of Papa’s voice.

It is evening a few months later, and the three children are asleep. Mama pulls a kitchen chair close to the heat of the cast-iron stove. With her mending basket at her feet, she lays one of Papa’s shirts across her lap. As she hums, she snips the threads at the neckline, reverses the worn collar and pins it back in place. Tomorrow she will stitch it on the Singer sewing machine and the collar will look good as new.

With the parlor door closed, the kitchen feels toasty warm. Papa sits in his easy chair reading the *Fall River Herald News*. Each evening, the second floor tenant leaves it at our door after she’s finished reading it. Now Papa lays the paper

down and looks with fondness at his humming wife. Her head is bent over a shirt collar and her face puckers in concentration.

“Agnes,” he says with a bit of bravado in his voice, “look at us. Here we are, both twenty-nine years old and me a greenhorn from the Old Country, sitting here in the comfort of our first home.”

Mama hears the pride in Papa’s voice then realizes he has said “our first home.” It startles her. Her hand tightens on the sharp seam-ripper she uses to snip thread, and nicks her finger. She yanks her finger to her mouth.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Papa asks, rising from his easy chair to come closer.

“No, it’s nothing.” Mama waits a few minutes to compose her thoughts then asks, “But Joe, what do you mean our first home? I don’t want to move again. Why would we leave here?”

The questions pop out abruptly. Perhaps she is remembering the day they moved from Fountain Street where she left two older sisters behind, along with many happy memories. At that time, Papa said they needed to move because the rent was too high and they wanted to save for their own home.

But Mama remembered lazy days visiting with her sisters, Mary and Irene. The three families lived in apartments in two six-flat buildings connected by a small grassy yard. After chores were done, the sisters met to gossip while the cousins played. On weekends, the three families gathered in one another’s cool basements, while Grandma watched the sleeping children upstairs. Mama played the mandolin, Papa played the guitar, and everyone sang. As the bottle of wine was passed around, the sad Portuguese ballads changed into lively songs and dancing. It was hard to leave all that and move to the cramped tenement above the barroom. Now they were in their first real home, and it sounded like Papa wanted to move again.

Papa clears his throat, and Mama is brought back to the present.

“Agnes, you misunderstand. We won’t leave this house. This is where we will raise our family, and I will plant my garden and fruit trees. But I want to buy more houses.” Papa slides into a kitchen chair and sits by Mama who has stopped sucking her finger. She gives Papa her full attention.

“Let’s face it Agnes, I’ll never get ahead working at Firestone. Only yesterday I overheard the super talking about more layoffs. Owning more property is the way to better our lives and provide a future for our children.” Mama remains silent. “We’ll make the sacrifices while we’re young. If we continue to save, we

can pay off this house in a few years and then save for another. When a good buy comes along, I'll be able to act quickly. Agnes, it is rent money that will send our boys to college and give all our children a better life."

Papa puts his arm around Mama's shoulder and says, "Come on, Agnes, let's go to bed. You'll see. It will all work out."

Mama folds the shirt in her lap and places it in the mending basket. She checks on the sleeping children then follows Papa into the bedroom. Her thoughts are heavy and disturbing. How much longer will Papa be willing to take banana sandwiches and a thermos of tea in his lunch pail? Where will he find the time and energy to make repairs to their home, work in the garden, satisfy tenants' demands to paint their apartments and replace leaking faucets? Only a few weeks ago, the pipes in the third floor apartment froze making a terrible mess when Papa tried thawing them out.

"Guess I need to turn off the water before I start working on the plumbing," he laughed as the bursting water soaked his clothes. Nothing daunted him. He always felt he could handle the job. Why couldn't she share his optimism?

The next morning, Mama gets the boys ready for school and prepares Papa's lunch pail. After George and Junior walk to school, she bathes me on the kitchen table then nurses me until I fall asleep. She settles me in my crib and goes to her sewing machine to finish the collars on Papa's shirts. In the silence of the house she works and ponders Papa's dreams.

The day goes swiftly, and soon Papa and the boys are home. Mama fixes a snack of graham crackers and milk for George and Junior, and coffee with lunch crackers for Papa. He soaks the milk crackers and eats them with a spoon, slurping any remaining coffee. After his snack Papa goes outside to feed the chickens. In less than ten minutes, he returns from the yard holding something in his hands.

"Look Agnes," Papa crows, "fresh eggs from the henhouse. I knew those Rhode Island Reds would be good layers."

Papa hands the first eggs to Mama and pats her round belly. "America is truly the land of plenty." Mama gives him a wistful smile. With another child on the way, Mama knows they will need more than eggs. But she keeps these thoughts to herself. She adds the eggs to the ones in the icebox and says, "We have just enough for baking *massa*." Papa snaps his suspenders and hops a little dance around Mama. Papa loves Mama's Portuguese sweet bread. And we love the way it makes the kitchen smell.

Soon it is Thanksgiving Day, 1938. I am one-year old and already walking. We celebrate the holiday with one of Papa's chickens, and carrots and potatoes from the garden, which have been kept in the cool cellar.

"A feast, Agnes," Papa says rubbing his stomach. "And the *chourico* in the dressing makes it perfect. You amaze me with how you manage."

Mama smiles in appreciation, satisfied that she made the right decision when she spent the precious coins for the spicy Portuguese sausage.

That was the first Thanksgiving of sixty, all celebrated at 262 Division Street. The little house would see joy and sorrow unfold through the years, but Papa kept his word. He raised his family and planted his garden, and Mama never had to move again.

The Kitchen Stove



When I picture winter mornings in our kitchen, the cast-iron oil stove takes center stage. Like a favorite aunt who comes to visit, it draws me close and wraps me in its comforting warmth.

Every part of that black stove was important, including the shelves on the side where mittens were put to dry and the top shelves where bread dough was set to rise. On four round cook-plates, pans of water heated for Saturday baths, and once a year on Christmas Day, fava beans were toasted until they danced with blackened crispness.

During the early morning hours, Papa would be the first one up, checking the level of the oil before going downstairs to the cellar for a full container. From our bedroom we could hear the familiar gurgle when he hoisted the oil jug upside down and tipped it into place. It was such a comforting sound and one we took for granted, never once thinking how cold the house was when Papa got up. He kept the fire going from dawn to late into the night.

Awake and lying in a warm bed under layers of woolen coats, I would ponder my bare feet flinching when they touched the chilly linoleum. The only incentive for making the dash was in knowing how welcoming the kitchen would be. Mama would already have the oven door open with our clothes draped over to warm before we put them on.

“Careful, don’t get too close. You’ll burn yourself,” Mama would caution.

The smell of rising yeast bread carries me back to that kitchen stove, and I am once again four years old. Mama, covered with floury dust, is elbow deep in the blue and white enamel pan. She laps and overlaps the elastic mound of dough, then places it on the top shelf of the stove. She covers it with a clean kitchen towel and tells me it is going to rest before it rises.

“Do you want to rest?” she asks hopefully.

I answer no. Napping is for Mary, who is our baby.

She gives me a thoughtful look. “Mama is going to bring the clothes in from the line. You play here in the kitchen where I can see you.”

She carries a basket to the pantry and drops it on the floor. I follow her and notice frost edging the window. When I am older I will scratch it with my fingernails. But now I am too little to reach the icy patterns of lace along the window frame. Before Mama reaches for the clothesline, she says, “Go back by the stove where it’s warm. Mama will be finished here soon.”

I wander away from the pantry and back to the cozy kitchen. I look up at the pan of bread dough to see if it is growing. The towel is still flat, but a sweet smell fills the kitchen and makes me wish it was ready to bake in the oven. I decide to wait in that small space behind the stove.

Peering from my hiding place, I watch Mama wrap her kerchief on her head and tie it under her chin before she opens the small door in the lower half of the window. A blast of cold air, crisp as new snow, blows in. It cools the small pantry when she pulls in the stiff clothes. She drops them into the basket along with some of the clothespins which stick to the clothes. After she latches the little door shut, she breathes on her fingertips to warm them. She removes her headscarf and wipes her glasses which are all fogged up.

I wonder if Mama will notice me, but she’s too busy finding places to dry the clothes. She reaches up to open a frame attached to the wall next to the stove. Papa made that frame which slides up and opens with wooden fingers that spread out like the insides of an umbrella. When it’s empty, it slides back and closes flat on the wall. Now Mama slides the sleeves of Papa’s shirts on the open frame, making it look like a familiar scarecrow. When that’s full, she shakes out the other stiff clothes and drapes them over the standing wooden horse. It is when she tries to

slide the horse behind the stove that she notices me sitting in the corner all scrunched up.

“What are you doing there?”

“I’m smelling the resting bread,” I answer, and Mama laughs.

“Well, I know a better place,” she says and reaches for my hand. Mama leads me to her bed and tells me to lie down and close my eyes.

“When you rest with your eyes closed, the bread rises even faster.”

And it must be true because when I wake up from my nap, a crusty round loaf sits on the table next to a dish with a chunk of creamy butter.

In a later memory when I am seven, I awake one Sunday morning and hear Papa stirring. I jump out of bed and bolt to the kitchen.

“Good morning, little girl,” he greets me. “Come stand right here where it’s toasty warm.” He opens the oven door and drapes my Sunday dress over it.

I rub the sleep from my eyes and smile up at him. I move closer to the open door. My polished shoes rest underneath with my socks inside.

“Am I going to have company walking to church today?” Papa asks. I nod my head with enthusiasm. The excitement of walking to church with Papa makes me dress quickly. I mustn’t make him late for choir.

Sometimes after church, we stop at *Tia Irene’s* house for donuts and coffee. But today we go straight home so that Mama can leave for the next Mass. When we arrive, she has a breakfast of eggs and chunks of her crusty Portuguese bread ready. She keeps it warm on the shelf of the stove. Papa likes to sop up the runny yolks with his bread, but I like my eggs cooked hard. The bread is so warm the butter melts quickly, and when I bite through the crust, I get butter all over my face. Mama notices my shiny face and shakes her head while handing me a napkin. Then she gives her parting instructions to me.

“Your sisters have already eaten. Play nicely with them and no fighting.” And she’s off to church in a whiff of rose-scented perfume.

Years later, when *Tia Maria* gets a new stove, she gives us her mint green one. I am eleven and sit in front of that stove with my sister Rita’s right leg resting in my lap while I massage her withered leg muscles. She contracted polio when she was three and I was taught how to massage calf muscles and stretch the shortened

foot. Somehow, being close to the comforting warmth of the stove eases the painful therapy. These evenings with my sister will influence the course of my life.

It wasn't until I was in high school that the cast-iron stove was relegated to the cellar and replaced by radiators. Now we had hot running water and every room was warm in winter. Instead of gurgling oil, we heard the hissing and hammering of radiator pipes. During the week, sliced bread was delivered to our house, and on Sundays after church we stopped at the bakery for *massa*. With ten children, Mama no longer had time for baking bread. There was no place for an old-fashioned oil stove in our lives, and we put it in a dusty corner down in the cellar and out of our minds. Or so I thought, until one day the memories rose like warm bread dough, and I remembered the stories.

Mary

On May 20, 1939, a new baby girl arrives screaming and squalling. Her name is Mary, and she has taken over the household. I am nearly two and keep out of Mama's way as she walks back and forth holding the baby over her shoulder, patting her back.

"Why does that baby cry all the time?" Papa calls from the bedroom one afternoon. "How am I supposed to get my rest?"

Papa works the third shift at Firestone and sleeps during the day. He stands all night at a machine that cuts rubber and comes home tired and cranky.

"I'm trying," Mama blurts out with a worried look on her face, "but she's a colicky baby."

School is out for the summer, and George and Junior play marbles in the back yard. They mark a circle in the dirt with a twig and shoot the marbles in and out of the circle. Mama checks on them from the window and gets an idea. She picks up a thin blanket and carries Mary outside to the carriage on the porch. She tucks her in and rocks the carriage back and forth, hoping the fresh air and rocking will help the baby sleep. Soon all is quiet and Mama tiptoes back indoors.

But the peace doesn't last long and Mary is crying again. Mama glances at the closed bedroom door, then out the window at the screaming baby. Mary is crying so hard now that the baby carriage is shaking. Mama takes one last look at the bedroom door then goes outside. I am playing with clothespins under the kitchen table, temporarily forgotten.

Mama carries Mary back indoors, and she squirms in her arms and howls. Behind the bedroom door, Papa gets up. He puts on his yard pants and yanks the waist together with a safety pin. Mama hasn't had time to mend the missing button. He opens the bedroom door, stomps into the kitchen and gives Mama a hard look.

"What more can I do? I had to bring her back in or the neighbors would think I was neglecting her."

Papa grabs his straw hat from the closet shelf and mashes it on his head.

"Well, I may as well go feed the chickens before work. It doesn't look like I'm going to get any more sleep today." When he slams the kitchen door, it makes a loud bang and I feel the rumble inside my body.

Later, when Papa leaves for work, Mama bakes bread. She puts a glob of sticky dough in the blue and white pan then covers it with a towel. She feeds Mary who spits up the milk right after she's nursed. Mama wipes her tiny mouth with an old diaper then puts her down for a nap. I'm glad because she takes a lot of Mama's time. Even with the door closed, I hear her crying. Mama ignores the crying. She lifts the towel off the soft ball of dough and slaps it on the kitchen table. It's big and puffy now and smells so good. Mama punches it a lot until it gets small again.

"Why you punch the bread?" I ask with a child's curiosity.

"I'm kneading it," Mama says. I think she needs to punch it because the crying baby upsets her. Next Mama puts the dough back in the pan and covers it again. She says it's time for the dough to rest and for me to take my nap.

My crib is in the second bedroom, but the baby is asleep there now and finally quiet. So we go to Mama's room. I climb onto the bed and lie on the quilt with different patches of color. I pick at a loose thread in the corner and make a tiny opening for my finger. Mama raises the bedroom window as far as it will go and props it with a sawed-off broom handle. She lowers the shade to darken the room but leaves a few inches at the bottom for air. The breeze flaps the shade and moves the fringed tassel in a little dance.

Then Mama goes to her dresser, sprinkles some alcohol on a rag and ties it around her head. It smells like medicine. I crinkle my nose and make a funny face. She reads the question in my eyes and puts her finger to her lips.

"Sh-h-h. Mama has a headache, so let's be very quiet now." The bed creaks and sinks in the middle when Mama lies down, and I snuggle close. She gently removes my finger from the cotton fluff inside the quilt and folds my tiny hand in her pudgy one. I bring her hand close to my nose. It smells sweet like rising bread dough. The last sound I hear is the gentle flap-flap of the shade. Everyone sleeps, even the baby.

Teresa

Mary keeps Mama so busy that I don't think we will have any more babies. But I'm wrong. One day in April when Mary is almost two and I'm three and a half, we return from a visit to *Tia* Irene's house to find Mama in bed, with a baby sleeping in the bassinet nearby.

After a few weeks, Miss Harrington the nurse comes to our house. Mary and I sit quietly and watch. When she opens her black bag and takes out cottonballs and bottles of medicine, the sharp smells prickle my nose. She checks the baby and says, "I understand this baby was a lot bigger than the others."

"Doctor Costa weighed her at ten and a half pounds," Mama answers.

"The baby looks very healthy, Mrs. Silva, but you must remember to get your rest."

Mama sits in the chair listening, and smiles. Her brown eyes look fuzzy behind her glasses, and she nods her head. Miss Harrington snaps her bag closed and gets ready to leave. She looks at us and asks Mama, "Do you have any help with the little ones?"

"My upstairs neighbor stops by, and this baby is so good. I'm able to rest when Joe gets home."

Miss Harrington slips on her coat and picks up her bag. She turns to Mama.

"I'll be back next month, but let us know if you need something before then."

"Thank you, I will," Mama says, and she opens the door and watches Miss Harrington leave. Once she's gone, Mama brings over some clothespins for us to play with then lies down for a nap.

* * *

Our new baby is so quiet we hardly know she is here. She doesn't stir when Mama changes her diaper, but looks all around the room with her big brown eyes and makes cooing noises. When Mama is finished nursing her, a little milk dribbles from her mouth and she closes her eyes. Her ears are like little sea shells, and Mary runs over and tries to poke her fingers in those tiny shells.

"This is Teresa your baby sister. Be gentle," Mama says as she moves Mary's hand. Mary frowns and runs away. Mama lays the baby down for a nap and closes the bedroom door. I like the new baby, but we didn't need another one.



Our second floor tenant, Alice Cambra, comes each day to visit. She wears pretty dresses that fit close at her tiny waist and flare out when she clatters down the stairs in her high heels. Alice always wears lipstick and earrings, not like Mama who does so only when she goes to church.

Even when Mama dresses for church, she doesn't have a small waist like Alice. Mama is lumpy, but her corset makes her straight up and down. Her stubby legs puff over the sides of her Sunday shoes, which have a small heel. Every time Miss Harrington comes to visit the baby, she reminds Mama to rest her legs more, and Mama always says she will try.

On Sundays Mama goes to early Mass, and when she returns, Papa leaves for the 10:30 service where he sings in the choir. While we clamor for Mama's attention, he slips on his suit coat and adjusts his tie. He smooths his hair and reaches for his hat. He pinches the crown with thumb and two fingers to form a peak in front. Then he tips it over his eyes at an angle.

"I may stop at Irene's after church," he tells Mama. He means *Tia* Irene, Mama's sister, who lives across the street from church. She usually has donuts on Sunday morning.

Papa waves good-bye and goes out the door. I hear him whistling as he skips down the steps. Mama changes into her white lace-up shoes with the chunky heels, puts on her comfortable housedress and covers it with an apron. Then she gets busy preparing Sunday dinner.

Very soon I hear the quick tapping of high heels on the steps and a knock on our door. It's Alice.

"I've come to see if you need help with the baby while you get dinner ready," she says to Mama.

She loves Teresa and wants to adopt her, but Mama says no. It seems like a good idea to me. We already have two boys and two girls. Alice is married to Butch who's away in the Navy, and they don't have any children. She must be lonely upstairs in her apartment.

“But Agnes, you have so many children, you wouldn’t even miss her,” she tells Mama in her throaty voice. “Besides, she’d be right upstairs. You could see her whenever you wanted.”

They’ve had this conversation before, and Mama always says no. However, she does let Alice take Teresa upstairs for a little while. Later, when Alice brings her back, both Alice and the baby sparkle. She snuggles Teresa in her arms and tenderly adjusts the booties that match the frilly pink dress. The baby’s dark hair is twisted into ringlets around her bonnet. She looks like a doll and smells nice too. I know Alice didn’t use the Argo corn starch and smelly white cream that Mama uses for diaper rash.

“I gave her a nice warm bath, and she’s all cleaned up and powdered,” Alice says as she nuzzles the baby’s neck.

Mama stands real still and makes her stone face. It’s the same look she gives Mary and me when we’re making too much noise and Papa is trying to sleep. I don’t think Mama wanted Alice to use the pretty smelling powder.

“Shall I put her down in her bassinet for a nap?” Alice timidly asks. Mama’s hands are dirty from peeling potatoes, but she stops to rinse them before she takes Teresa.

“I don’t want her to be a bother to you,” Mama says.

Alice quickly replies, “Oh, she’s hardly a bother. I love having her.”

Mama carries the sleepy baby to the bassinet in her room. Alice watches, folding her empty arms across her chest. She looks like a child whose favorite toy has been snatched away. Mary and I walk close to her and stand by her side. She smiles and absently pats us on the head, her eyes following Teresa. Mama returns from the bedroom and closes the door behind her.

“The baby is already asleep,” she says abruptly. “You must have tired her.” The smile is wiped from Alice’s face, and her mouth trembles as if she might cry. Mama sits at the kitchen table and continues to peel potatoes. She peers at Alice over her wire-rimmed glasses, and in a softened voice that sounds more comforting she says, “The baby really looks nice in that outfit. Thank you.” Alice gives her a half smile. Then Mama asks, “When is Butch coming home?” and Alice says she’s not sure. Alice stands looking at the closed bedroom door, then blinks her eyes and seems to notice Mary and me for the first time.

“Such sweet girls,” she says, and ruffles our hair. “Well, I must be going. I need to fix my own dinner.” Alice closes the door and slowly climbs the stairs, the very same stairs she scrubs to a dull gleam every Saturday morning. Her high heels barely tap the ground.

Firestone Fire

Screaming fire alarms awaken me and I think I'm having a bad dream. I hear hushed voices in the kitchen outside my bedroom door and swing my bare feet to the chill linoleum floor. Clanging alarms propel me to the kitchen where my brothers are in their pajamas, eyes glued to the window.

"What are you doing out of bed?" whispers George, who's nearly ten.

"I thought I heard fire engines." I answer groggily.

"You did. There must be a huge fire down the hill because three fire trucks have already rushed down Broadway." Broadway is only a block away.

"I saw the hook and ladder," bursts out Junior, who Mama says is always first where there's trouble. Junior has dragged over a kitchen chair and stands on tiptoes to see out the top half of the window. I look out and see black clouds of smoke with star-like orange sparks filling the sky. Halloween is a few weeks away, and I wonder if this is a frightful trick. I twist my neck to get a better look, but the fire engines zoom down the hill, and all I see is a red blur.

I feel someone crowding next to me at the window. It's my two-year old sister Mary who sleeps in a crib, but I'm not surprised to see her. She knows how to climb out.

"What's going on?" Papa stumbles into the kitchen rubbing his eyes. Mama quickly follows holding baby Teresa who starts to cry.

"There's a big fire down the hill, Pa," George exclaims. "Do you think it's Firestone?"

"Oh my God," Papa says and dashes back to the bedroom to get dressed.

Mama trails Papa, bouncing the baby in her arms. "Where are you going, Joe?"

"It looks like the Plant may be on fire. I'm going to see what I can find out."

"Be careful," Mama says. She hugs the baby close and makes soothing sounds.

"Can we go?" my brothers ask, jumping up and down.

"You stay here where it's safe. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Papa grabs his jacket and goes outside where it seems all the neighbors have gathered, talking and pointing down the hill. I've never seen so many people in the street, even in the daytime.

"Can we go out on the porch?" we beg.

"You stay right here until Papa comes back. It's dangerous out there."

Mama's words are followed by a huge explosion. Our hands, pressed against the window, tremble with the blast. Pillars of fire shoot up in the air like fireworks, and suddenly night becomes day. More fire trucks scream down Broadway. I feel scared for Papa. I go to the pantry window where I'll be able to see him when he returns.

I notice our neighbor, Mr. Rocha, who works at Firestone with Papa, standing by his front gate. After a while I spot Papa rushing up the hill, but Mr. Rocha steps out to stop him. Papa's body moves like he's buzzing with electricity. His arms and hands flap about as he talks and he points down the hill.

Mr. Rocha presses his cheeks together and shakes his head. Then he slowly turns around and goes back into his yard where Mrs. Rocha waits on the porch, wrapped in her robe.

"Papa's coming," I say, running to the kitchen.

"Shush," Mama says, "I just got the baby quiet in her crib." She tugs her robe close, ties and re-ties the sash.

The door opens and a black sooty face with round blue eyes comes in. Papa coughs so hard, tears make squiggly white lines down his cheeks. His smoky clothes fill the kitchen with a harsh smell. Mama removes his jacket and helps him to a chair. We gather around him, staring.

"Papa, your face," George says, pointing a finger and breaking the silence. Papa puts a hand to his face, and his fingers come away with black tips. He looks surprised. Mama brings him a wash cloth.

"Is it Firestone?" she asks in a faltering voice.

"Yes, and it's bad. Fire trucks are being called in from all over the state. Some say from as far away as Boston. Sparks are flying over rooftops, and with the wind fanning the flames, it looks like the fire has spread over a two-block area."

Mama rinses the washcloth and carries back a glass of water. Papa takes a big gulp and coughs hard. He says in a hoarse voice, "There are hundreds of people out there standing on the Brightman Street Bridge and the Slade Ferry Bridge. They're probably all thinking the same two things I am—was anybody hurt, and when can we return to work? "

"Thank God it's Saturday and you weren't working the night shift." Mama pauses as if remembering something. Then she asks, "Was there a third shift on?"

"Of course," Papa says. "They think everyone got out but they're not sure." He leaps from his chair and moves around the kitchen like a wound up toy. Just as abruptly, he stops, leans close to Mama and says gravely, "All shifts have been

working round the clock for months. We have rush orders to fill for emergency defense.”

Mama’s eyes open wide. Papa’s words catch her completely by surprise. All of a sudden she realizes we are listening, and she shoos us back to bed. Except for George and Junior, we don’t understand what we are hearing. We strain to eavesdrop from our bedrooms and feel the tension.

“Agnes, I didn’t want to worry you, but we’ve been working on gas masks for months. When we enter the war ...”

“What do you mean... enter the war?” Mama interrupts. “President Roosevelt says this is not our war. And I believe him.”

“Then why am I cutting hoses for gas masks?” Mama doesn’t say another word, but I hear her slippers slapping back and forth between the kitchen and pantry as if she’s looking for something that will change the meaning of Papa’s words.

Monday afternoon, Papa hurries home with the paper and reads the headlines to Mama while she fixes his snack. All weekend long, rumors of the fire swirl like ashes in the wind. Now we will learn what really happened. Papa clears his throat and begins.

“Saturday, October 12, 1941. Fire sweeps Fall River Firestone Plant; two Mill Buildings gone, others still burning.” Papa continues.

“Firemen from more than fifty-two cities and towns in Massachusetts and Rhode Island come to our aid. Largest blaze in the history of Fall River.”

Mama asks, “Are they certain now that everyone got out?”

“Wait a minute. I haven’t reached that part yet.” Then Papa reads with relief. “Workers, warned by an alarm, rushed from the building, and there was time for all to escape before the explosion.”

“Thank God,” he sighs. He folds the paper and lays it on his chair.

The following day, Papa walks to Firestone to check on the situation. He comes home with the newspaper tucked under his arm. He makes himself comfortable in his easy chair and quickly scans the page. Mama gets supper ready. It smells like she’s cooking spaghetti with leftover chicken. She pokes her head out of the pantry and asks Papa, “What does it say today?”

Papa reads. “Before they got the fire under control, five of eight buildings were destroyed. Oh, and listen to this. They think the fire was started by an

overheated glue pot on the third floor of the Number Five Plant. That's the building where the gas masks are stored."

Mama notices us listening and quickly interrupts, "I think that's all we need to know for now." She calls us to the table, and we respond promptly because we like chicken mixed with spaghetti. Papa looks at his plate and says, "Agnes, where's the chicken?"

"I'm stretching it," Mama says. She smiles with her lips but it doesn't reach her eyes.

Papa hears the tremble in Mama's voice. "Ah, Agnes, you worry too much. The work we were doing before the fire is too important to stop now. They'll figure out a way to get us back to work. You'll see."

He sits down and smiles at our upturned faces, and we relax. He raises his fork to eat, and we follow suit. With a twinkle in his eyes he says, "Now, let's see what Mama's stretched chicken tastes like."

Velvet Dress

After weeks of hearing Mama and Papa talk of nothing but the fire, I begin to wonder if they are going to forget my birthday. George and I both have November birthdays, three days apart. I will be four and he will be ten. Sometimes my birthday falls on Thanksgiving Day, and when that happens, Papa kills two chickens instead of one, and we have cranberry sauce and orange soda as a special treat.

Finally the day arrives, but nothing seems to be happening. I think I must have the wrong day. I look out the window and wonder what I should do. Brown curled leaves dance and swirl in the street. I see a lady walking towards our yard carrying two bags in her arms. There's something familiar about the quick walk of her skinny legs, but the bags hide most of her face. She notices me looking out the window, lifts her chin and gives a big smile. When I see the crinkles by her eyes and her dark skin, I'm reminded of walnuts at Christmas. Just then, a gust of wind loosens her scarf, blowing her hair back from her face. I clap my hands. It's my *Tia Irene*.

I call Mama, and she quickly opens the door to let in her older sister. *Tia Irene* has a long walk from her house to ours, and her arms must be tired. Mama takes both bags and puts them on the kitchen table. Then she slides a chair over for *Tia* to sit on.

"I can't stay long," she says to Mama, sounding out of breath. "Manny is with the children, but he'll need to leave for work soon. And you know how he minds the children."

She winks at Mama when she says this, as if they share a secret.

"But I wanted to bring some things for the children that mine have outgrown." *Tia* has two girls and a boy, all older than I am. She brings nice clothes and they always smell of soap and flowers.

Tia sits down with a sigh then asks, "How are things at Firestone?"

"About the same," Mama says. "There's still talk about you know what."

Mama glances over at me to see if I am listening. I pretend I'm practicing tying my shoelace. *Tia* shifts around in her chair then swings her short legs. Like Papa's baby chicks fluffing their feathers or scratching in the sawdust, she's never still. She pulls her chair closer to Mama and sits on the edge.

"Just remember what President Roosevelt said," she says, with a serious look on her face. I think the President must be an important person. When Papa

listens to him on the radio, he leans forward in his chair, and his face has that same look of concentration.

“Yes, but I also know what Joe tells me,” Mama sighs.

“It’s a worry.” *Tia* fidgets in her chair then pops up to leave. She reaches down where I am playing and gently squeezes my shoulder.

“There’s something special in there for the birthday girl,” she says, pointing to the bags. Her eyes sparkle, and a smile lifts a corner of her mouth. “Your cousin Evelyn hated to give it up, but she’s too big for it. I think it’s going to be just right for you.”

Mama and *Tia* continue talking, and I keep my eyes on the bags. As soon as *Tia* Irene leaves, I make a dash and start tugging at them.

“Wait a minute. Let Mama do it.” Mama likes seeing what’s in the bags, too. She takes out jackets and a thick blue sweater then makes hm-m-m sounds of pleasure when she pulls out a soft red flannel shirt. Next out come black rubber boots with cleats. My brothers walk to school and will soon need them. But so far, I don’t see anything for me.

Mama reaches into the second bag and her hand stops when she feels something. She slips out a purple dress that makes me suck in my breath. Mama even handles it differently. She takes my hand and slides it over the slippery ripples that feel like wet soap flakes.

“It’s velvet,” Mama says. She holds it up against me for size, and I nuzzle my chin into the purple softness. My nose twitches in pleasure as I recognize a light scent of flowers. I could close my eyes and know this dress belonged to my cousin Evelyn. The color reminds me of Mama’s grape jelly when the sun shines on the glass jars lined up on the counter. I can’t wait to wear this dress, and I think this must be the best birthday anyone could have.

Pearl Harbor

“Ever since that purple velvet dress walked in the front door, that’s all I hear you talk about. Can’t you sing a different tune?”

It seems like Mama’s words don’t make sense, but I understand and recognize her tone of voice. For weeks I’ve been bothering her about hemming the dress so that it will be ready for Christmas, and she’s getting impatient with me.

“I just want to be sure it will be ready,” I say innocently, but she is not fooled.

“I told you it would be ready for Christmas and it will. Now, go find your sister and play with her. I’m going to give the baby a bath.”

I love to watch Mama bathe the baby so I sit close by, perched on Papa’s easy chair. Before she carries Teresa from her crib, she prepares the kitchen table following the same routine each time. It’s like watching a play. First she covers the left side of the table with layers of newspaper to catch the splashes. On that she sets the blue and white speckled pan, and to the right of the pan she spreads a large, soft flannel pad. On top of the pad she lays the towel which is kept separate from our towels and used only for the baby.

In a shoebox on top of Mama’s dresser are the Argo corn starch to prevent diaper rash, a bar of Ivory soap, Johnson’s baby oil and a huge roll of cotton batting wrapped in dark blue tissue paper. Mama brings the box to the table and unravels the cotton. She pulls off several small pieces on which she pours a little baby oil and then twists to make swabs for cleaning Teresa’s tiny ears and nose. Near the very edge of the table she lines up the baby’s clean shirt, diaper, and night dress. When Teresa was a new baby she wore a bellyband, but she’s older now and doesn’t need one.

After everything seems to be in order, Mama says this little chant, “pan, pad, soap, towel” while glancing once more at the table. Now she’s ready to pour the water, which has been heating on the stove. She adds just enough cold water until her dipped elbow tells her it is the right temperature. The last thing she does before getting the baby is to lock the kitchen door so no one can walk in and cause a draft. She checks on my sister Mary to see what she’s playing with, then takes a quick look out the pantry window to make sure my brothers are still in the yard. At last she carries Teresa to the table, removes her diaper, and sticks the safety pins into the bar of soap.

The first time I saw Mama do this I asked, “Why do you put the pins in the soap, Mama?”

“It keeps them sharp, and I can tell if there are burrs on the tips. Let me show you.” Mama pokes a pin through an old diaper, and I see how it pulls and splits the threads.

“The baby wiggles around so much, I have to be able to pin the diaper quickly and safely,” she continues. “But mostly, having the pins in the soap helps me keep track of them.” Mama sure knows a lot, and I like it when she explains things to me.

Now Mama brushes away damp curls from her face, and I see tiny beads of sweat above her smiling lip. I think she likes to bathe the baby as much as I like to watch. It’s warm and cozy in the kitchen with water steaming on the stove, the heavy scent of baby oil and the sweet whiffs of soap.

The baby makes cooing noises while Mama undresses her. When Mama slides her into the water, she cries a little but Mama holds on firmly. She gently laps warm water on the baby while she sings a song. Soon Teresa is making babbling noises like she’s trying to sing right along with Mama. Chubby legs kick and splash water on Mama’s dress, but she croons her song and doesn’t seem to notice. The heat from the stove and Mama’s soothing voice make me feel sleepy, and I lean back in Papa’s chair.

Suddenly, there’s a pounding on the door and I’m startled. Mama gives a little jump, and Teresa throws out her arms and starts to cry.

“Agnes, for Heaven’s sake, open this door. Something terrible has happened.”

It’s Papa, but his voice is hoarse and gasping as if he’s been running.

Mama’s face pales and she quickly wraps the baby in the towel then stands behind the door while she unlocks it. Papa dashes inside and runs to the radio. His face is flushed red with the cold, and a wintry chill follows him indoors. He switches the dial until the static clears. With his finger on his lips he signals us to be quiet. I hear the words “Pearl Harbor” over and over again. Mama blurts out, “Where’s Pearl Harbor?”

“Somewhere in Hawaii. The Japanese have just bombed our navy base there.”

Mama stares blankly at him and holds the crying baby close. She goes back to the table but doesn’t seem to know what to do next.

Papa, who hasn’t yet removed his coat, hunkers close to the radio. The unsettling voice fills the kitchen and rumbles like a faraway thunder storm coming our way. I feel frightened when I see Papa rub his chin and frown as he listens so intently. Mary, who’s been playing in the bedroom, comes toddling in, not knowing

what to make of all the commotion. When Papa looks up, he notices me staring at his serious face. He comes away from the radio and gathers me to him gently.

“You, too,” he says to Mary, reaching out with his hand. “Come to Papa.”

I want him to turn the radio off. Even nestled into Papa’s shoulder I hear that radio voice, and the kitchen isn’t cozy anymore.

Purple Velvet

When you are four and have been promised a beautiful dress for Christmas, war does not have any visible impact on your life. That is how it was for me that Christmas of 1941.

True to her word, Mama somehow found the time to hem the purple velvet dress. That Christmas I was dressed like a princess. *Tia* Irene sent over a hat, coat and leggings to match, and a rabbit fur muff to complete the ensemble. I need no picture to remember.

On Christmas Eve, Mama tears strips of cloth to curl my hair. She has me hold the top of the strip while she wraps sections of my hair around each one and knots them at the top. When she is finished, the bottom half of my head feels stiff, and when I sleep the knots are uncomfortable. I willingly tolerate the discomfort for the banana curls I am promised.

In the morning, after the rags are removed, I strut around the house with exaggerated steps so the curls will bounce. Generally my hair is in pigtails with a part straight down the middle, white as a chalk line. Mama says the ringlets will last for days because I have a natural curl.

The wine-colored bonnet ties under my chin with silken ribbons. A stiffened brim frames my oval face, and coal black curls settle around my shoulders.

My hands snuggle inside the fluffy white muff, and I smile inwardly and outwardly with the luxuriousness of splendor. It matters not that my regal outfit is a hand-me-down from my cousin. To me, it is new.

Underneath the coat I wear my purple velvet dress, a shade deeper than the coat. I can't decide what feels better, the feathery fur muff against my cheeks or the slinky ripples of the velvet between my fingertips. I roll the slithery fabric until Mama warns me it will wrinkle.

Because this is a special occasion, Mama lets me wear her heart-shaped locket which hangs on a delicate chain. When she lays it around my neck, I feel a warm tingle where it rests.

Mama presses her nail in the center of the heart and gently pulls it apart. To my amazement and delight, the locket magically opens.

"Mama, it's empty," I say with disappointment.

"Someday, Mama will have pictures to put inside." Her answer satisfies me, and I am soon distracted by how the light catches the gold and makes it gleam.

With a soft click, Mama snaps the locket closed. The shiny gold heart glows against the deep purple, and I nearly burst with happiness. I am ready for Christmas.

A few years after the purple dress no longer fit, and I reluctantly passed it on to my sister Mary, I acquired a red velvet dress. It, too, caressed my skin and was soft to touch, but my fingertips were disappointed at the droopy, thin folds. The color red did not captivate me as the purple did.

There is a reason purple is the color of royalty. Seduction and charm nestle in the color of plump purple grapes, ripe plums and claret wine, especially to the heart and eyes of an enchanted child.

Papa Sings on Mr. Borges Radio Show



Although our country is at war, there are moments of such domestic routine, war feels far removed from daily life. Sunday morning is one of those times. My two older brothers sit on the kitchen floor by the console Philco radio, practically hugging it. Mary and I shove each other for the nearby chairs.

“Mom, it’s almost ten o’clock. Can we turn on the radio, huh, can we? We’re going to miss Papa singing.”

“Sit down and be quiet,” Mama says, as she adds the potatoes to the chicken roasting in the oven. She closes the oven door and moves toward the radio. The Azorean Hour is about to begin, and Papa will be singing this morning.

Two rituals dominate our Sunday mornings: going to church and listening to the Azorean Hour. This local variety show under the direction of Mr. Borges is in Portuguese. It has a great following in Fall River among the many families who, like Papa, emigrated from the Azores. On any given Sunday, Papa sings at least one song and possibly two. Mr. Borges makes all the decisions.

Once Mama gets the radio station tuned in clearly, she unties her apron strings and looks for an empty chair. The kitchen is steamy with the aroma of Sunday dinner. It's so hard to sit still and listen to Mr. Borges drone on in a language which only my parents understand. But we cock our ears, and when we hear Papa's name announced, the squirming stops and we sit attentively.

I picture his thin trimmed mustache and lively blue eyes as he sings a haunting Portuguese folk song, called fado, in his clear tenor voice. Sometimes he plays mandolin, but for this sad song his fingers gently seek out the stirring melody on his guitar. Suspended from a colorful strap around his neck, the polished dark wood of the classic guitar is the perfect accompaniment for the soulful music. We are wrapped in pleasure and pride.

During the commercial break, we hear Mr. Borges mention Sandy Beach, and we know he's talking about the Portuguese Festival coming up in a few weeks. Papa has already told Mary and me that he will take us this year. Mama will stay home with two-year-old Teresa because Mama doesn't like crowds. And my brothers say they're too old for those sissy picnics.

This will be our first time and we don't know what to expect, but we are excited. Meanwhile, I close my eyes and see Papa's bent head and curved fingers that move with a life of their own. I listen to the guitar music and daydream.

At last, the day of the picnic arrives, and we dress in our Sunday best. Twirling in our dresses until the skirts fly up above our knees, we do a little tap dance in our Sunday shoes. We make the baby laugh.

"Calm down, little girls, or you'll be too tired to come with me," Papa chides with a twinkle in his eye. "You'll have to stay behind and take a nap with the baby." Mary and I look at one another and giggle. We know he is joking.

We say good-bye to Mama and leave her standing in the kitchen, holding baby Teresa. Papa carries his guitar, protected in its sturdy black case with red velvet lining. He knows he will be called to the microphone to entertain the crowd. The three of us make a merry group as we walk the several blocks to Sandy Beach.

When we arrive, crowds of people are already sitting on blankets with food spread around them. Children run barefoot in the sand, squealing and chasing one another. Two men are up on stage playing mandolins, and music swirls around us. Papa looks for a spot for us when he hears the voice of his friend, Jack Arruda.

“Joe, come here and sit with us,” he motions with welcoming arms.

We follow Papa to a family with three children playing nearby. A blanket, covered with baskets of food, rests on the ground. Mary and I glimpse the food, but we know not to ask for anything until it is offered.

“And who are these two young ladies you have with you?” Mrs. Arruda asks.

“These are my daughters, Dolly and Mary. And this is their first time at the festival.”

I smile shyly but delight in the attention. Two of their children come to sit on the blanket. They smile at us, and we begin to feel comfortable.

“Sit down, sit and join us. We have enough food for everyone. But first, Joe, we need a song from you.”

Papa’s friend calls out to the crowd that Joe Silva is here. Like a murmuring brook, word passes from one to another, and the crowd calls for him to go up on stage. Papa is drawn by the crowd but glances at us to see if we are comfortable with his leaving.

“Don’t worry about the girls,” Mrs. Arruda reassures him. “We’ll take care of them like they’re part of our family.”

“Will you be alright here with Mr. and Mrs. Arruda while I sing a few songs?” Papa asks. But the question is rhetorical as he’s already sliding his guitar across his shoulder.

Mrs. Arruda clears a space on the blanket for us and opens up the picnic basket. I smell chicken and *chourico*, see luscious slices of cut up watermelon and notice jars with enticing plump, yellow beans. Mary and I are in for a treat.

We hardly pay attention to the music coming from the stage as we join this warm family and share their picnic lunch. Soon I hear people shouting out, *Tautog*, *Tautog*.

That’s the name of a silly song Papa made up about a fish called a *tautog*. Papa clears his throat and strums a few chords before singing. A friendly voice calls out, “The man is dry, give him something to drink.” Several people come up to Papa offering wine from their bottles. Papa laughs, takes a sip and begins the song. The crowd quiets down to hear the words, but soon join him in the chorus.

After a few more songs, Papa says some words in Portuguese then jumps down from the stage. In high spirits people follow him, offering jars of marinating fava beans, tiny pickled onions, *chourico* sandwiches, sweet *massa* and more wine.

Papa makes a beeline for our blanket, but the happy group follows. We are introduced, and the merry followers cheer us. We feel proud to be with Papa and bask in reflected glory. The picnic continues with laughter, back-slapping and good humor while Mary and I sample the wonderful spicy foods.

Skirts burst with color and energy as dancers take over the stage. Matching red and yellow ribbons flow from their hair, and music surrounds us. The afternoon disappears in a blur of happiness, and it seems too soon when the moment comes for Papa to say good-bye to our friends.

“Agnes is home with the baby, and she’ll be waiting for us,” he says as he collects his guitar.

“Tell her to come next time and bring the baby. We want to meet all your family.”

Bags of food are put into our arms, and we walk slowly towards home. Someone in the crowd notices that our arms are full, and we are offered a ride. It is only my second time in a car and such a special treat.

The first time was when Uncle Manny from Connecticut drove down in his brand new car and wanted to give me, his godchild, a ride. I sat in the back with Mama and promptly got carsick. He wasn’t too happy about that. With all the new foods I’ve eaten this day, I hope I don’t get carsick again.

When we arrive home, Mama smells the wine on Papa and her face tightens with pinched lips. Papa puts his gifts of food on the table and encourages Mama to taste. When he tries to wrap his arms around her, she brushes away his embrace and mutters Portuguese words that sound harsh. Papa smiles good-naturedly and says he is going to take a nap. Mary and I seek out a quiet corner. We can tell Mama is upset, but we don’t understand why.

As Papa’s popularity grew, he was invited to sing more frequently on Mr. Borges’ radio show. The response was so positive that it wasn’t long before he was one of the regulars on the Azorean Hour. On Sundays we all took our places and sat mesmerized around the kitchen table. Even Teresa sat quietly in her high chair chewing on bread that Mama had baked yesterday.

“Quiet now. Your father is going to sing right after this commercial.”

Mama didn't need to shush us. We sat in complete stillness, focused on the radio, waiting for Papa's familiar voice. Somehow, the songs coming from the radio sounded more special than when he sang them at home.

When the baby heard Papa's voice, she looked up with a puzzled look on her face. You could just tell she was trying to figure out where his voice was coming from. Mary and I wondered about that, too.

All too soon the song was over, and the mood broken. George and Junior dashed outdoors, and Mary and I returned to playing with our dolls. Mama checked on the chicken before adding carrots and potatoes to the pan. Every time she lifted the lid, my mouth watered.

Before long, Papa was home. Mama called outside for my brothers to come in for dinner. We all clamored around him wanting to know what Mr. Borges had to say about his newest song. He was all smiles and danced around us. Teresa reached out to Papa to be held so that she could be part of the excitement.

"Now just a minute. One question at a time," he laughed. But we could see by his crinkly eyes and the way he danced with the baby that he was enjoying being the center of attention in a circle of love.

Mama brought the chicken dinner to the table, and our interest shifted from Papa to the wonderful smells enticing our hungry stomachs. We pushed our way to our chairs and sat together to eat. Papa had a faraway look in his eyes and drummed his fingers on the table. I could tell another song was already humming in his head.

War Hits Home

Some months after the Portuguese festival, Papa is approached about running for the office of City Councilman. He doesn't have real political aspirations, but his friends and admirers prod him. They say he is an honest family man who would well represent the Portuguese people of Fall River. I don't remember any campaign headquarters or mass mailings of political literature, mostly a few posters appearing in the neighborhood with Papa's name in big letters.

Mr. Borges began introducing Papa on his radio show as the singing councilman, and that was the extent of the advertising. The day of the election, we were caught up in the excitement then later disappointed when Papa lost by less than two hundred votes.

"Imagine what I could have done if I had worked seriously on this campaign," he chuckled. That was the beginning and end of his political career.

Meanwhile, more serious events are being announced on the radio, written about in the newspapers and discussed among neighbors. The war continues, and Mama worries that Papa might enlist. Even though he is the father of five children and is needed at home, Papa says it is the duty of men to serve their country.

"I'm only thirty-three years old and in good health," Papa says one evening after supper. "My country needs me,"

"You have five children. No one expects you to fight," says Mama, her face showing strain. "Besides, you're needed here. Didn't you say Firestone is stepping up production to get those gas masks out as quickly as possible?"

"Ah, that's nothing. Anybody can do that," he says with a disgusted voice. "But I'm young and strong. I have a responsibility to my country."

Mama looks weary as she clears the dishes from the table. Food stains smudge her apron, and a lank strand of hair falls over her eyes. She absently brushes it away. She stares at Papa for a moment then plants her hands on her hips before speaking.

"You should protect your family first. That's where your responsibility lies."

Papa gives her a stern gaze then walks over to his chair where he sits and reads the paper in silence. I don't like it when Mama and Papa talk this way to each other. It's all because of the war and it scares me.

I wander away quietly and look for George. I don't have to go far because I hear him in the pantry where he's washing dishes. At least Mama thinks he's washing dishes, but he's splashing clothespins into the water.

"What are you doing?" I ask. He's surprised to see me and drops a clothespin on the floor where small puddles surround his feet.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he answers a little sheepishly.

"Looks like you're playing a game with the clothespins."

"These aren't clothespins. They're American pilots dropping bombs on the Japanese bad guys." Droning sounds emit from his buzzing lips as he drops two more of his bombs into the cold dishwater. I can't seem to get away from this war.

Mama walks into the pantry with her arms full of supper dishes. Her gaze sweeps over the dirty dishes on the counter and the puddles on the floor. She squeezes in her dishes among the others and says, "George, would you concentrate on what you're supposed to be doing and get those dishes washed already?" Her words sound tired as if she's used up all her strength.

George takes the clothespins out of the water and tosses them over by the washing machine. When Mama is satisfied that the dishes will now get done, she takes my hand and says, "Come with me Dolly. Time to get you and your sister ready for bed."

Kindergarten

In the fall of 1942, I enter kindergarten. After a breakfast of hot oatmeal, I have a few minutes to play with Mary before school starts. When I put on my jacket, Mary's lips get pouty as if she's about to cry.

"I want to go too," she complains as she tugs on my sleeve.

"You'll be going next year," Mama patiently reminds her nearly every morning. While she's distracted, I dash out the door. When my thumb lifts the latch on the gate, I step into an exciting world beyond our front yard.

At recess, I run and play with new friends. In the classroom, we do art projects on sheets of brightly colored construction paper. I love the smell of paste and the thick feel of the crayons in the palm of my hand. I try to draw the leaves and paste them on the trees the way Miss McCready shows us. When the bell rings, we put everything away inside our desk and go home for lunch. My friends and I walk up the hill together, and plan to meet after lunch for the walk back to school.

Mary is happy to see me and thinks I am home to stay. After lunch when I put on my jacket, she stands blocking the door so that I can't leave.

"I'll be back soon," I tell her, "and then we can play for the rest of the day." But she doesn't move. I trick her and say, "Oh, I forgot my pencil. Would you get it for me?" When she goes to find it, I bolt out the door. Mama stands Mary on a kitchen chair by the window. When I look back to wave, she is rubbing her eyes with her hands balled into fists. Her lower lip hangs. I feel bad that I had to trick her, but I hear the school bell and run down the hill.

Each day my friend, Nancy Burgher stops by and we walk to school together. Her mother watches from their porch. One morning I ask Nancy, "How come I never see your father?"

"He's fighting in the war," she says with a sad look. We don't speak of her father again.

After school, Mama has me accompany George to Marky's Meat Market. We carry cans of hardened cooking fat that Mama has been saving, and trade it for meaty soup bones.

"And tell him I want more meat on those bones," Mama cautions, a serious look on her face.

I skip down the street until we reach the store then quietly stand by George while he delivers his message to the butcher. Mr. Marky nods and goes into the back room. He comes out with a large parcel wrapped in white paper. When we get home and Mama unwraps the parcel, she says, "That's more like it," and smiles.

Sometimes, when Mama is busy with the baby or cooking supper, her face seems stern. So it makes me feel good when she smiles. It tells me that I'm a helper, and her smile is like a sunny thank-you.

Except for standing in line with George for sugar and coffee rations and collecting tin cans, wartime privations hardly affect us. We never notice the meat shortage because of Papa's chickens. And the large vegetable garden, which he calls his victory garden, feeds us all summer long and into the winter with Mama's canning. There's always bread and coffee on the table when Papa gets home from work.

Because we don't have a car and walk everywhere, the gasoline shortage isn't a problem for us. Except all that walking wears out the soles of our shoes. Some evenings I see Papa hammering new leather with tiny nails on the iron shoe form in the cellar. If he can't get leather, he lines the inside of the shoes with heavy cardboard. When that wears out, our socks get holes in them. We learn to pull the sock forward and fold it back under the toes. After a while we don't notice the lump.

It is only when we have black-outs, and hear the airplanes droning overhead that the war feels real. But if anyone can take a scary situation and make it seem like an adventure, it's Papa. On those nights of the keening sirens, when we sit in darkness with the shades drawn and the lights out, Papa tells us stories. From the throne of his easy chair, with Mary and me sitting on the floor close to his knees, he begins, "Once upon a time ..." At ten and thirteen, Junior and George claim they are too old for stories, but I see their shadows draped over the kitchen chairs nearby. And they don't push and shove like they usually do. Mama lies down resting while the baby sleeps.

The heat from the kitchen stove wraps around us while Papa spins his tales of growing up by the ocean in the Azores. We can almost smell the fish and hear the swooping seagulls screeching for scraps. He talks about his father's goats and how their bells tinkle as they climb the hillsides, covered with blue hydrangeas. And when he gets to the part where he travels to America at the age of ten, I wonder how he could leave all that behind. I want to ask him but I don't want to break the spell. Like baby birds in their nest, we gather with our mouths open, but instead of worms we are nurtured by his hypnotic words. We listen so raptly, we are disappointed when the all-clear rings and the lights are turned on. We beg him to finish the stories.

"It's late now and time for bed. We'll continue tomorrow," he says, while stretching and yawning. But the next day there might not be time for a story, and we are left hanging in suspense. Each evening we beg for the ending of the story until finally he says, "Okay, now, where was I? Let's see if you were really listening." Like a clever spider, he captures us in the web of his imagination.

Some days when I get home from school, our neighbor Alice is visiting. When she talks about Butchie, there are tears in her eyes. He's fighting in the war and she worries he'll be killed. In the front windows of three neighbors, bright gold stars tell us a son or husband has been hurt in the war and may be dead. Like storm clouds rolling in, the winds of war blow stronger, and even a child can sense it moving closer. Papa reassures Alice about Butchie then starts talking again about how he needs to do his part.

Mama is so worried that she overcomes her natural shyness and secretly visits the draft office the next morning. With hesitating words she reveals her pregnancy then lets them know this will be her sixth child. She begs them not to accept her husband for active duty.

The Accident

We'll never know if Mama's pleas kept Papa out of the war, or if it was his job at Firestone. He never left for the sandy beaches of the Pacific. But early one morning in March of 1944, the stinging sands of war swirled like gritty particles in a storm searching for him. And found him on the night shift at Firestone. Long after it happened, Papa told us his story of that terrible night:

"About three o'clock in the morning, I was working the night shift, loading up my machine with rubber tubing. Because we were fighting a war, my machine was switched from processing tires to cutting rubber hosing for gas masks. There had recently been an accident involving this particular piece of equipment, and it was difficult to get anyone to operate it. I saw the danger in the job and suggested to my boss that they put a safety guard on the blade. I was told it was my job to run the machine and not to criticize.

"I ran that machine for about eight months, alternating two weeks on nights and two weeks on days. To make it fair for the workers, they changed shifts every two weeks. My boss assured me no one else would touch the machine, that I would be the only one to run it during my shift.

"But that particular morning, my boss-- making rounds and not hearing the clatter of the cutter-- walked towards it. He must have wondered why the cutting switch was turned off. Rubber hosing partially covered the table, and I was bent over the side getting more. Probably half asleep himself, he never noticed my left hand resting near the blade. He flipped on the switch and walked away, looking for me.

"Before anyone could realize what was happening, the blade started to move, tugging on my fingers with a terrible growling noise. I tried to feel for the shut-off switch with my free hand, but couldn't reach it. By now the blade was cutting my wrist. I struggled to pull my arm out of the cutter. It took all of my strength. Blood spurted everywhere, but all I remember was holding onto my bleeding stump, and horrible screams coming from somewhere nearby. Three men passed out. I don't even remember the pain. That came later."

I am roused from sleep by a frantic pounding on our kitchen door. I hear Mama get out of bed, and shuffle towards the insistent rapping.

“Who’s there?” she asks in a trembling voice.

A mumbled response comes through the door. I get out of bed to see who it is. Mama opens the door to her disheveled and wild-eyed sister Irene. *Tia* has run the mile between their two houses, and is breathless and choking with tears.

“Agnes, Agnes,” she wails, “there’s been a terrible accident at Firestone. Joe lost part of his foot in a machine!”

Whether in her nervous excitement or in a flustered effort to soften the injury, she says foot instead of hand. Mama’s face blanches, and she shivers. A horrified moan escapes her lips. I feel scared, and run back to bed to wake Mary.

I have little recollection of the events that followed, but remember vividly the day Papa returned from the hospital. Uncle Mac, one of the few relatives with a car, brought him home. The car door slammed twice. I bolted from bed and ran to the window where Mama stood peering from behind the curtain. We could see Uncle Mac’s hand dart out to steady Papa, but he quickly pulled it back, as if he changed his mind. It was then that I remembered the accident.

“Quick, come away from the window and stand over here by me,” said Mama.

She hurried towards the kitchen table, resting one hand on a chair and one on my shoulder. Her jittery fingers pressed through my thin pajamas and made me feel anxious.

Papa’s and Uncle Mac’s shoes clomped on the wooden porch steps then paused in the entryway before entering the kitchen. Cold night air, clinging to their coats, brought a chill into the room. I heard rustlings in the bedroom and knew Mary and my brothers were awake, but they didn’t venture out of their rooms.

Like a photograph, Papa stands framed in the doorway dwarfed by Uncle Mac. His face is gray and drawn, but he attempts a brave smile. Next to the dignified height of Uncle Mac, Papa looks shrunken, as if his spirit has been sucked out of him. His left coat sleeve hangs empty and I shudder. Poking through his partially open winter coat is a thickly, bandaged stump. I stare at the bandages, and a sinking thought flees through my mind “How will Papa play his guitar, and make beautiful music without his fingers?”

I think I see tears in Uncle Mac’s eyes, but it could be the gusts of wind and blowing dust that make his eyes water. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, absently brushing the tears across his cheek. I am mesmerized by his fingers.

Mama clutches her swollen belly, as if protecting it, and I edge nearer her side. I feel like I'm living a nightmare, but I am fully awake. I want to cry, yet understand I must be strong. Mama hesitates then steps forward.

"Joe," she cries, a mixture of fear and relief cracking her voice. I follow her lead and move closer to Papa. He is finally home from the hospital. For a brief moment I think life will return to normal. I am wrong. Life will never be the same.

Case Dismissed

Some days it seems like Papa lost more than his arm in the accident. He doesn't smile much or call me his little girl. We don't listen to the radio show on Sunday mornings, and it feels like sadness moved in and pushed the music right out of our house. One good thing is that Papa is back to work, but it didn't happen without a struggle. Firestone wanted him to retire and settle for five hundred dollars, but Papa refused.

"What good is five hundred dollars to me if I don't have a job?" I overheard him saying to Mama.

Firestone didn't like Papa's attitude and took him to court. When it was all over, he told us the story of what took place.

"Why won't you accept the five hundred dollars, Mr. Silva?" the judge asked. Holding the stump close to his body, Papa stood in front of the judge and steadied himself.

"Your honor," he said politely but firmly, "I have five children to provide for and a wife who is expecting soon. If I accept the five hundred dollars, Firestone will find some excuse and before long, I'll be out of a job. I need to be able to support my family." Then Papa sat down.

There was whispering among the Firestone lawyers. A flash of anger lit the judge's face. He leaned forward and folded his hands. The room hushed. Then he spoke.

"Mr. Silva," he said in a resonant voice. "You will accept the offer of five hundred dollars."

The Firestone lawyers visibly relaxed in their chairs. Then the judge continued, "And I will make certain that you have employment at Firestone until the day you are ready to retire. For now, they will find light work for you until you are physically able to assume regular duties."

We cheered when Papa got to this part of the story, and how he loved telling it. He said he was sure he saw a little smile when the judge looked up at him, banged the gavel and said, "Case dismissed." It was a victory for Papa, and the beginning of happier times.

Tying Shoelaces with a Hook

For several weeks now, Papa is driven to a special place in Boston where they fit him with a prosthesis. George taught me the word for Papa's artificial hand and steel hook.

"Some of the soldiers coming back from the war will have prostheses for their missing arms and legs," he says. I think about Alice's husband, Butchie, and I hope he won't need one.

Papa's hook has a leather strap that wraps behind his shoulder and under his left arm, like a harness. When he hunches up his shoulder muscles, the two steel prongs open up. Papa must get tired opening and closing that hook all day. It's the first thing he takes off when he comes home from work. I see a red rash under his armpit where the strap rubs. He pats powder under his arm and puts on a fresh T-shirt. Then he covers the stump with a clean, white sock. Sometimes in the evening, when he's reading the paper in his easy chair, he absently rubs the stump like he's trying to feel the missing part. I always have to look away.

Papa hangs the hook on back of the bedroom door. I am fascinated and frightened by it. Even though it looks scary, it's what helps Papa the most. The dress arm is just for show with stiff plastic fingers curled closed, but the hook can grasp things. When no one is looking, I pull the pincers apart. It takes the strength of both my hands to pry it open just a little. Papa has to open it with a shrug of his shoulder muscles. Yet I never hear him complain.

One afternoon as I play on the kitchen floor with my doll, I watch Papa struggle to tie his shoelaces with the hook and his hand. He leans forward in his easy chair, hunkers over his work shoes and practices tying the bow. It is a repeated act of frustration as he pulls the laces tight, crosses one over the other then attempts to loop and tighten the bow. They slip apart and he tries again. I can't bear to watch as the tie slips one more time.

"Can I help, Pa?" I ask.

"No, Dolly, you can't. I know you think you would be helping me, but it wouldn't really, would it?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, and move closer.

"Well, if you tie the bow, then I have to come find you or someone else every time I put my shoes on. But if I learn to do it myself ..." He leaves the sentence dangling, and raises his blue eyes to meet my hazel ones. I know he wants me to think about the end of the sentence. I make a stab at it.

“If you teach yourself you’ll be able to tie your shoes just like before,” I offer, and wait for his approval as he continues to practice.

“Well,” he muses, “not quite like before, but I know what you mean. You see little girl, just because a thing is hard is not a reason to give up.” He nearly has the two loops crossed. He moves his fingers slightly and once again they slip apart.

“But, sometimes, you have to know when to stop and give it a rest, before you try again.”

He stands up and stretches his back. “What do you say we sit out on the porch and watch the grass grow?” I laugh at his joke and feel lighter inside. Papa’s starting to sound like himself again.

The Left-Handed Guitar

I come home from school one day and am startled by a strange guitar on Papa's bed. It is light in color, not nearly as beautiful as his classic one. This must be the left-handed guitar bought with some of the fundraiser money.

On the day his friends brought the gift, I remember them sitting around the kitchen table, not knowing where to look. Papa rested the hook on the table in full view. He could see they were uncomfortable by the way they shifted their eyes to his hook and then quickly away, like lizard eyes that close and open in a flash.

Papa offered his friends something to drink but they declined. They handed him an envelope, and told him it was a token of love from his radio fans. After thanking them, he did an interesting thing. Instead of reaching for the envelope with his right hand, he shrugged his shoulder so the hook would open, and pinched the envelope like a robin tweaks a worm out of the earth. I think Papa was showing off a little, but I also think it was his way of saying he was going to be okay.

"I'm going to buy a left-handed guitar with some of this, and teach myself to play again," he boasted. Then he flexed the fingers of his right hand and said, "I'll teach these fingers to find the chords and I'll strum with the hook."

Papa's friends seemed relieved to hear him talk that way. They nodded and smiled at one another.

"We'll be listening for you on Mr. Borges' Show," his friend Jack said. Then they all got up, said good-bye and good luck, and were gone.

Mr. Borges continues to invite Papa to sing on his Sunday morning show, but now others play the guitar to accompany Papa.

"They don't play the right chords and their timing is all off," I hear him grumble to Mama. She rubs her forehead and looks as if she has one of her headaches.

"I told Mr. Borges I'm going to teach myself to play left-handed, and then I'll be back with some new songs."

"You don't think it's too soon?" Something in Mama's voice makes Papa look up.

"Agnes, it's just like falling off a horse. You get right back on just as quick as you can."

Mama folds her lips in and doesn't say anything more. Papa goes into the bedroom with the new guitar. A few minutes later we hear tinny sounds coming from behind the door. Mama sits at the table, hangs her head and presses her hands over her ears.

A few days later on a sunny August morning, I am awakened to the scent of a familiar perfume. I get up to find Alice, sitting at our kitchen table sipping a cup of coffee. She must have brought down one of her cups because it is dainty with flowers, not like our thick white mugs. She stands up and glides over to me. A sweet aroma follows her, and makes me think of the lilacs in our garden when they bud in the spring.

"Good morning Dolly," she says brightly. "How are you this beautiful summer day?"

I don't answer because I'm confused.

"Where's Mama?" I ask, wondering what Alice is doing in our kitchen so early in the morning. She overlooks my rudeness and says, "Your Mama is at the hospital having a baby."

This is news to me. Mama always has her babies at home. Why did she have to go to the hospital for this one? I worry about that but instead I ask, "Does Papa know?"

"Oh yes. Your Uncle Mac drove both of them to the hospital early this morning, and I'm staying until your Papa comes back." She sips her coffee.

"Would you like some breakfast?" she asks, and taps her high heels towards the pantry. Every time she moves, her lavender dress flares and a pouf of lilacs fills the air. She comes back holding a box of cornflakes. I notice a lipstick smear on her coffee cup. Mama never has lipstick stains on her cup. Somehow it doesn't feel right having Alice in our kitchen fixing breakfast.

"It's too early to eat," I tell her. "I'm going back to bed."

I leave her with the cereal box in her hand, and a puzzled look on her face. I need to wake Mary and tell her we have another baby.

Rita



Near the end of August of 1944, Mama comes home with baby Rita. It is good to have Mama back because Papa is not a very good cook. One day he asked George to pick green peppers and tomatoes from the garden. Papa fried the peppers and put them in a sandwich with mayonnaise and tomatoes. We all sat around the table staring at those ugly sandwiches.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Junior, who was more daring, said, “These aren’t like the sandwiches Mama makes.”

“No, you’re right,” Papa said in a soft voice. Then with more firmness he continued, “They’re the sandwiches Papa makes. Now eat up and be thankful we have a garden full of fresh vegetables.” That wiped the revolt off our faces, and we ate without further comments.

Now it is good to have Mama back, even though the baby keeps her busy. I’m nearly seven and Mama says I’m a big help. When she feeds the baby, I keep Mary and Teresa quiet by playing with them. I like watching Rita take milk from the bottle. She has a face like a china doll with long dark lashes, and when she sucks, her rosy round cheeks move in and out like Junior’s accordion.

One day there’s a knock on the kitchen door. We know it’s Alice because we heard high heels tapping on the stairs.

“Come in,” says Mama, sitting in her robe, feeding Rita.

Alice bounces in with a gift, wrapped in a large pink bow. She wears a yellow dress and her cheeks are flushed.

“I just finished washing the stairs, and while they dry, I thought I’d drop off a little something for the new baby,” she says. She comes nearer to take a better look. “She’s a beautiful baby, Agnes, so tiny and dainty.”

The baby turns to listen to the strange voice, but Mama guides her mouth back to the bottle. Mama wrinkles her brow and gives Alice a fretful look.

“I know she’s tiny and it worries me. She only weighed six and a half pounds when she was born. That’s four pounds less than Teresa weighed. I wonder if I did the right thing having her in the hospital.”

“Oh, Agnes, that has nothing to do with it. She looks like a healthy baby.”

“I don’t know,” Mama sighs.

“You’re just tired from everything happening all at once. The steps should be dry now. Why don’t you let me take Teresa upstairs for a little while?”

“That won’t be ...” Mama starts to protest but Alice quickly interrupts her.

“I mean, let me take all three girls upstairs for a while. I have something I want to show them.” And she gives Mama a sweet smile.

Mary and I are playing with Teresa but our ears perk up when we hear Alice say she has something for us. We know she loves Teresa best, but she’s nice to us, too.

“Can we go, please Ma?” we chorus.

Mama burps the baby over her shoulder, and a bubble of sour milk stains her dress. Generally, Mama puts a diaper on her shoulder but today she must have forgotten. She places the bottle back in the baby’s mouth and Rita makes more sucking noises. Mama looks up at our eager faces and then at Alice.

“Well, just for a little while. And send them back down if they’re a bother.”

It doesn't take us long to scramble after Alice, and scamper up the soap-scented stairs to her apartment on the second floor. We know we're in for a treat.

After we play for a few hours, Alice says it's time to go home. We find Mama in the kitchen, fixing supper. George does his homework in the parlor, and Junior plays outside with friends.

"Did you have a good time with Alice?" Mama asks.

"Oh, yes," Mary and I chirp in unison. "She played music on the radio, and we twirled and danced all around the kitchen. Alice danced right along with us, and then we got so thirsty she gave us some soda. We had fun."

Mama hardly listens. She seems distracted. And then I hear the rough strumming sounds from behind the bedroom door. Papa is practicing on the new guitar but I don't hear him singing, just those jarring metallic scratches. I want to smash that pitiful guitar. It sounds so awful it makes my heart ache.

Suddenly, the noises stop. We hear the snap of the case being closed. Then Papa comes out of the room holding the guitar in its ugly black case. He walks over to the closet, reaches up and pushes the guitar back on the shelf as far as it will go. All eyes are on him. Even George looks up from his homework. Without a backward glance, Papa walks out the kitchen door, closing it softly behind him. This time, he doesn't ask me to sit with him on the porch and watch the grass grow. The silence he leaves behind roars in my ears.

The Christmas Gift

It is a relief when school starts in September. I'm in second grade and Miss Tower is our teacher. When we're working at our desks, she walks to the back of the room then slips up the aisle between the rows. You're not allowed to look back, and you never know when she's going to stop by your desk and tap your knuckles with her ruler. I slouch in my seat, trying to be inconspicuous, but she digs her pointy fingernails into my shoulder and tells me to sit up. Her grasping fingers are like the claws of the golden eagle on top of the flagpole. Even though Miss Tower is mean, being in school is better than being at home.

Mama's always shushing us, "Don't disturb your father," even though he looks like he needs a friend. When he comes home from work, Mama has his coffee and crackers ready. He sometimes lifts his spoon and puts it back in his mug without ever tasting. Mama pokes around in the cupboards in the pantry and peeks out at him. He used to hurry with his snack so he could be out in his garden, but this year there is no garden.

He leaves to feed the chickens, and as his steps go down the cellar stairs, I wait for an opportunity to follow him. Mama comes out of the pantry and clears away his coffee mug. She checks to see that we are occupied then says, "Play quietly while Mama lies down for a little while." She ties her headache rag around her head, and goes into the bedroom where the baby is napping.

As soon as she lies down, I see my chance. Mary plays school with her best student, Teresa, and shows her how to color inside the lines. Teresa is happy to have Mary play with her. Being three, she never argues that she wants to be the teacher, like I do. She's happy following Mary's instructions. I slip past them, and creep down the cellar stairs.

Papa is putting chicken feed in the metal pail, and I slowly walk towards him.

"Can I come with you?" I ask shyly.

"Well, well, it looks like I have a helper today." His smile encourages me.

"Yep." I smile back, and swagger closer.

"How would you like to learn about tricking the chickens today?" he asks. He sure knows how to captivate me.

"How do you do that?"

"Follow me and keep your eyes and ears open."

We leave the gray cellar for the sunny outdoors, and I know this is going to be fun.

It's smelly in the chicken coop with messy clumps of straw in the corners mixed with things I don't want to think about. Junior is supposed to clean it out but he needs reminding. The hens cluck and watch, and when they hear Papa rattle the corn in the pail, they fly out of the nests and swoop around his legs. He leads them out into the yard where he scatters the corn. They run every which way, stepping on one another's toes, pecking and squawking.

While they're occupied with the corn, Papa reaches inside the nests for eggs, and gently places the warm, tan eggs in the empty pail. "What a clever trick," I think.

"Do they always leave their nests like that?" I ask.

"Usually, but not always. One day last week when Junior was in a hurry to play with his friends, he nearly got pecked in the eye."

"What happened?"

"Well, he didn't take his time shaking up the corn to trick the chickens outside. And this mean hen wouldn't leave the nest. Junior thought he could stare her down, and when he got too close, that hen must have thought his big brown eyes were glass marbles and she reached out and pecked him."

"Did he get hurt?"

"No," he chuckled, "he jumped back in time, but he got a scratch on his cheek and a good scare." Papa slapped his thigh, remembering. It felt good to be out here with Papa even though I was a little skittish having those chickens pecking so close to my ankles. I watched Papa, and how he kept moving towards the lopsided gate. We eased ourselves out without letting any of the chickens escape, and Papa had a pail full of fresh eggs.

December sneaks up on us this year and soon it will be Christmas. Every Christmas Eve Papa goes out after dark to find the best tree for fifty cents. Last year when I asked him why he waited until the last minute, he said, "There's a very good reason. You see, you have to wait until it's late enough for the tree-man to be eager to go home, but not so late that all the trees are sold."

That seemed to make sense, but this year I feel so uncertain about things. Ever since the accident at Firestone, Papa isn't himself. He isn't playful with us and doesn't appear to notice that Christmas is almost here.

So on Christmas Eve when Papa struggles into his winter coat, I'm not sure what to expect. I try to read his face, but he hunkers down into his collar and I can't see his eyes.

“Where are you going, Papa?” I ask, hoping he remembers what night it is.
“Oh, to see a man about a horse.”

That’s his pat answer when he doesn’t want to tell. He plops his hat on his head and walks out, closing the door softly behind him.

I worry that Papa has waited too long this year. Maybe he’s even forgotten that it’s Christmas Eve. With our noses pressed to the window, we take turns looking out into the darkness. It seems he’s been gone a very long time.

Suddenly, Mary shouts, “I see him, I see him.”

“Where?” Teresa and I ask. The window is so steamed with our breath that I have to wipe a clear space with my fingers. George and Junior, who are in the parlor moving furniture to make room for the tree, come quickly when they hear our excitement. Even Mama rushes to the window, wiping her hands on her apron.

I look again and see Papa dragging a tree behind him. It is covered with snow and doesn’t look very big. When Papa slips and struggles, Mama sucks in her breath and covers her mouth with her hand. Papa reaches the porch and Mama says nervously, “Junior, quick. Go outside and give your father a hand.”

Without taking the time to put on a jacket, Junior opens the door to the entryway where he and Papa lean the tree against the icebox.

“Close the door,” Mama says, “and come in where it’s warm.” She sounds excited and happy.

Papa brings the smell of the pine forest into the kitchen, as fragrant needles sprinkle from his coat onto the floor.

“It’s not a big tree,” Papa says to Mama, “but the branches are full and it only cost fifty cents.” He looks at our smiling faces and for the first time in a long time, happiness sparkles in his eyes. Papa stamps the snow from his shoes and slips out of his coat.

“We’ll let it rest a while until the snow melts off the branches. Then we’ll bring it into the parlor,” he says. He removes the hook and rubs his stump. Does the cold make his stump hurt? I sometimes wonder, but Papa never talks about it.

“Any coffee left?” he asks Mama.

Mama bustles into the pantry to perk up a fresh pot, and tells us it’s time for bed. That night we fall asleep to the scent of pine and the fragrance of coffee drifting past our nostrils.

On Christmas morning our little tree sparkles with blue, green, orange and red lights. Thin ribbons of tinsel, like strips of miniature mirrors, reflect the dazzling colors. The purple paper chain I made in school loops around the branches, and I think this is the best tree ever.

Mama has been up for hours preparing the dressing and the chickens. Now she hovers by the kitchen stove toasting fava beans. She tosses the nuts on the hot iron lids, and we watch the shells blacken and blister. The trick is to toast the shell so it's easy to flake off without charring the bean. We watch the favas dance and crackle on the hot stove. As soon as they are ready, Mama sweeps them off to the side to cool. We can hardly wait to bite down on the nutty goodness.

While Mama is busy with the favas, Papa uses the heel of his shoe to stomp on walnuts. He shows us how to split the shell without mashing the tasty meat inside. Soon we are all stomping and making a mess but no one seems to mind. We dig the walnuts out with our fingers and place them in a dish, licking the bits from our fingertips.

After Mama blackens all the beans, she places a pot of chestnuts to steam on the back burner. When they are softened and ready, we peel the purple nuts and add them to the dishes on the table. A ring of plump figs sits in the center of a platter, circled by bright orange tangerines. These treats make Christmas special because it's the only time of year we have them.

Mama tells us not to eat anything until dinner is ready. When she goes to the pantry to check one more time on the chickens, Papa pulls a fig off the ring and pops it into his mouth. His eyes dance with mischief. He lifts a finger to his lips, cautioning us not to let Mama know. Papa loves figs because they remind him of the fig trees that grew in his yard when he was a boy in the Azores.

The smells from the toasting fava beans and the zest of the tangerines fill the kitchen with a delicious aroma. Happiness oozes through my body like melting snowflakes. I let out a big sigh that I didn't even know was being held tightly inside. Gathered with my brothers and sisters around the warmth of the kitchen stove, I realize Papa's playfulness has returned. Could there be a better Christmas gift?

Papa's Garden

This will be Papa's first garden since the accident at Firestone. Last summer a friend offered to plant for him, but what he didn't realize is that Papa's garden starts long before spring arrives. In early March, Papa plants seeds in trays and places them by a sunny window in the cellar. He fusses over the young plants like a mother checking on her sleeping children.

Then one day in April after working his shift at Firestone, Papa walks up the hill with his lunch pail in hand, pauses and leans over the fence to look at the barren garden. He stands still and sniffs the air. He stoops down and squeezes his hand between the picket fence for a clump of earth. Rolling the dirt in his hand, he lifts it to his nose then sifts it through his fingers. A smile lights up his face. Brushing his hand on his pants, he springs up. He swings through the gate, leaps up the porch steps and into the kitchen.

"Agnes," he announces, "today I start the garden." Then he dashes to the bedroom to change into his yard clothes. Mama smiles and prepares his snack of crackers and coffee. Still tucking his shirt in his pants, Papa comes out of the bedroom, hurries to the table and eats quickly.

"More coffee, Joe?" Mama asks. "No, that was just enough, thank you." Papa takes a last sip, scrapes the kitchen chair behind him and strides towards the cellar to check on his plants. Once he is satisfied that they are doing well, he gathers his equipment. Back and forth, from cellar to garden, he carries the hoe, the rake and all that he needs for preparing the garden for planting.



Every Spring I watch him start in the far corner by the fence, and methodically work the soil in neat rows. With one foot on the five-tined pitchfork, he leans all his weight, and presses into the hard-packed soil to till and freshen it. Sometimes, if winter has been particularly long and the ground still sleeps in frost, he plants both feet on the pitchfork and jumps on it. At five feet four, Papa needs his whole body to break up the clumpy mounds. This year, the first tilling of the soil has already been done by Papa's friend, John.

Now I watch the calloused fingers of his right hand work in harmony with the two-pronged steel hook on the left arm. At first he is clumsy, but after a while he gets a rhythm going, and his face relaxes. With a rolling shift of his right shoulder, the hook opens and clasps the pitchfork. He turns the loosened soil, pats it down, and spreads the manure. Fat juicy earthworms struggle through the fresh soil, and I make a sound of disgust.

“What’s the matter,” he asks, “don’t you like the worms?”

“They’re icky.”

“Oh no, little girl,” Papa says, “they are doing their job and they help me.”

“How?”

“See how they go in and out of the dirt like Mama’s needle when she’s mending clothes? That’s how they aerate the soil and bring oxygen to it.”

As Papa talks, he keeps working. I silently roll that new word, aerate, around my tongue, and have a new respect for worms. But I still don’t touch them.

Day after day, row after row, Papa works the loamy black dirt, pausing every now and then to lean on the handle of the pitchfork. He removes the handkerchief from his back pocket, wipes his brow and surveys his progress. Several hours pass until it is time for supper.

Mama pokes her head out the pantry window and calls to him. Papa reluctantly leaves the peace and rhythm of digging and turning the soil. He returns the pitchfork to the cellar, and removes his dirty shoes. Tomorrow he’ll work until the entire back yard is one fertile bed, ready to receive the tender plants that wait in the cellar.

Once the garden is fertilized, Papa plans where the plants will go. He carries out the seedlings of tomatoes, green beans, carrots and sweet peppers, and carefully plants them in neat rows. Potatoes, sweet corn and cucumbers follow. For moisture, he fills jugs with water then inverts them beside the thirstiest plants, and they grow strong and healthy. He weeds daily, and teaches me to step carefully between the rows.

On days when I escape Mama and her list of chores, I follow along like Papa’s shadow. The plants grow taller and capture my interest. I notice yellow flowers on the tomato plants, and I wonder how those small flowers will ever become juicy, red tomatoes.

I watch Papa pour a few inches of water into the bottom of an old coffee can. He opens the claws of his hook till he has a good grip on the can, then he walks up and down the rows of tomato plants, using his free hand to tap the harmful green worms into the water where they drown. It’s not so strange now to see him use the hook like a second hand. Then he pinches between the branches

where the suckers grow that sap the plant's energy. When he walks by the string beans, which are starting to send out tendrils, he says he's going to have to tie them up soon.

"Papa, how did you learn to do all these things?" I ask in amazement.

"By watching my father in the Old Country," he answers, "just like you are learning from me now."

I take a deep breath and fill my lungs with the richness of the earth. Standing in Papa's garden, I feel close to a grandpa I've never seen, but somehow know and love.

Papa tends his garden in the early morning or late afternoon, except when he's on the third shift. Then he's in the garden in the heat of the day. One muggy afternoon, I help Papa tie string beans to the wooden stakes. Beads of sweat drip from the tip of his nose. Suddenly he reaches into his back pocket for a handkerchief, and plops down in the dirt. He wipes his face and neck and says in a whispery voice, "*Querida*, hurry and get Papa a glass of water."

It takes me by surprise, his using Portuguese and calling me sweetheart. He usually calls me little girl or by my name. Something doesn't feel right. I fly across the backyard and into the kitchen.

"Mama, Mama," I cry. "Papa's hot and he needs water."

Mama fills an empty Mason jar, hands it to me and tells me to be quick. She slides open the window screen, pokes her head out and calls, "Joe, are you okay?"

I rush the water to Papa, trying not to spill. I notice his red face and wet T-shirt sticking to his body. When he raises his hand to drink, I see the leather strap that circles his armpit, dark with sweat. Papa gulps the water then sighs in relief. He removes his cap, waves it at Mama and pours the rest of the water on top of his head. Then he puts his cap back on his wet head.

"You are my helper," he says and smiles at me. It feels like a hug made out of words. He hoists himself up, and ties the last bean plant to finish the row. Then he rubs his whiskery cheeks and says, "Time to go check on the grapes." Under the grape arbor, thick vines make a shady place to rest. Papa takes his time moving from one bunch to the next, and tests for ripeness and color.

"It won't be long now," he says. When they ripen into fat purple balls, their juice will be so sweet, we won't mind the seeds.

The lazy weeks of summer pass, and the sweet corn begins to change. Silk tassels flow in the gentle breeze and the husks fill out.

“When will the corn be ready, Papa?” I ask expectantly.

“Pretty soon,” he says feeling the fullness of the ears. “Pretty soon.”

I can hardly wait for the day when Papa says, “Go inside and tell Mama to boil water.” Papa’s corn is so sweet and milky we eat it as it comes from the garden. We never use butter or salt. With tomatoes and cucumbers to add to the corn, Papa says we dine royally. He sometimes jokes with fancy words.

Every day after work he checks the garden for weeds, insects or lack of moisture. I notice the neighbors seem to slow down when they pass our yard. Papa raises a finger to his cap and says something friendly, but keeps right on working. When the vegetables ripen and bear fruit, all of Papa’s hard work pays off. He says that life comes from dirt, and I believe him.

“Dolly,” he says one evening, “go inside and see what Mama wants for supper.”

I return with a sack and tell him Mama wants carrots for her salad.

“Carrots ... well, let’s see if they’re ready.” He walks to the row of carrots and pulls one out of the earth by its feathery green top, brushes the soil off on his pants, and snaps a piece for me to taste.

“We have to give it the taste test,” he says with a conspiratorial wink. He knows Mama doesn’t allow us to taste the vegetables when we’re asked to bring them in to her. “Well, what do you think, A.B. Fink?” I giggle at his joke and nod my head in approval.

Every inch of the backyard is planted except for where the chicken coop stands. The grape arbor, adjacent to the hen house, reaches over the Rhode Island Reds as they peck around in their fenced yard scratching the dirt, hoping for an overripe grape to fall. At right angles to the chicken coop there used to be a rabbit hutch, but when we refused to eat rabbit, Papa took it down and planted an apple tree.

Down at the very edge of the yard is the fence that separates our yard from our neighbor, Mr. Soares. He lost an arm in a Firestone accident just like Papa, but he couldn’t adjust to the hook. I overheard Papa telling Mama he accepted a cash settlement, and never returned to work. Papa said Mr. Soares was an idle and embittered man. I knew what idle was because Mama was always saying that idle hands are the devil’s workshop. But I had to ask Papa what embittered meant.

“You know how your mouth feels when you eat one of those grapes before they’re ready?” Automatically my mouth puckers and my face scrunches. And I understand the sour pinch on Mr. Soares’ face when he sits on his porch with his

stockinged stump visible below his short-sleeved shirt. He spends most of his afternoons overseeing Papa's activities, while sitting on his porch or wandering around his well-tended yard.

The day Papa shimmied up the telephone post to unravel the clothes-line pulley, we could see the shadow of Mr. Soares at his window, peering through the curtain. Our neighbor doesn't approve. Nevertheless, the gouges and nicks from Papa's hook digging into the post, show that Papa has done this more than once.

When Papa dug the hole for the fig tree, Mr. Soares leaned over the fence. He shook his head and said Massachusetts climate was too cold for figs. But Papa kept on digging. Mr. Soares turned away in disgust, and spat on the ground. Papa knew what he was doing. He planned to use the thick post as part of a tent-like covering to shelter the delicate tree in the winter months. He would have figs as sweet as those that grew in the Old Country, and they would grow in his garden.

Not even a border of the back yard is given up to flowers. These grow in the front yard. The rosebush, prickly with thorns and fragrant red blooms, overlooks the corner where Division and Diman Streets meet. It is a favorite spot for taking family pictures.

A bed of lilac irises with graceful green stems soften either side of the concrete stoop by the front door. They make it a perfect place to sit on summer evenings, and chat with neighbors while waiting for the house to cool down.

The periwinkle hydrangeas stand proud and showy at the end of the front yard. When Papa was a young boy, he climbed hillsides crisscrossed with the blue snowballs. Like the fig tree, it is one more link with the Azores. They don't require much attention, and he finds the color blue restful.

Papa's eyes enjoy the flowers, but his heart and soul are in the vegetable garden. It's where I can always find him.

First Communion Day

Working in the garden is good for Papa. He smiles more and sometimes I hear him humming. With so much to do, Papa doesn't have time to be sad about the guitar. I know he'll find another way to bring back the music.

I like being with him in the garden, but now I stay in and study my prayers for First Communion. I need to learn lots of hard words like transubstantiation. I can hardly say it and when I try, Papa laughs then tells me to keep practicing. I know it means the bread and wine change into God's body and blood, but the word is too big to fit in my mouth.

At last the special day in May arrives, and I am dressed all in white. After the picture taking and the ceremony, Papa takes me to visit all my *Tias*. It's tradition to visit all the relatives within walking distance.

"Whose house are we going to visit next, Papa?" I ask clutching dollar bills in my gloved hand.

"Let's see. We just saw *Tia* Irene, *Tia* Maria and *Tia* Justine. I think it's time to visit *Tia* Georgine and Uncle Mac," he answers with a sparkle in his eyes. "Think you can walk that far?" he asks mischievously. I nod my head vigorously.

I fold and refold the dollar bills, hardly believing they are mine. Now that I'm seven and a half I'm so much smarter about money.

I remember a few years ago, when my godfather Uncle Manny came to visit. He gave each of my brothers a shiny quarter, but he gave me a dollar bill. I got so upset when I saw that paper money, I hid behind Mama's dress so that no one could see my tears. I knew it was bad manners not to be thankful, even if it was only paper. My brother Junior saw how unhappy I was and signaled that I should go with him. I released Mama's dress and followed him to the bedroom, where he quietly closed the door.

"Why are you crying? What's the matter?" he whispered. I hesitated only a minute and then I blurted out, "Uncle Manny gave you and George real money, but he gave me paper. And he's my godfather," I added with dismay, wrinkling the dollar in my sweaty palms.

"Wait. Don't do that." he said, reaching for my hands. "You're going to tear that up. I tell you what. I'll give you my quarter, and you give me that worthless old paper."

"You mean it?" I asked in disbelief, rubbing my teary eyes.

“Of course. That’s what big brothers are for. Only, let’s not tell anyone. It will be our secret.”

“Okay,” I agreed, feeling happy but also a little guilty. “You’re my best brother,” I said, quickly forgetting bad manners, and only thinking of all the candy a quarter could buy.

I thought of this now as Papa and I walked through the neighborhood. I was certainly a lot smarter now. It was such a beautiful sunny day, and we passed several other girls in their white dresses going to visit their relatives. I waved to them and they waved back.

“Your hands look pretty full with your prayer book and your money,” Papa said. “Want me to hold your three dollars in my pocket before we visit *Tia Georgine*?” I thought that would be okay. Papa wouldn’t trick me like Junior did.

We continued walking, Papa sweating in his Sunday suit and heavy dress prosthesis. From a distance it looked like a real hand, but when you were as close as I was, you could see it was fake plastic. I think the leather strap under his arm made Papa warm, but he wanted to look special for me.

I wore a lacy dress, long stockings held up with garters, and gloves. Mama’s special golden locket hung around my neck. The summer breeze scooted under my veil and billowed around my face cooling me. My white patent leather shoes sparkled in the sun and made me feel like dancing. I sort of did skip and dance as we got closer to *Tia*’s house, but I had to be careful or my lace veil might slip off my hair. Mama rolled it up in rags last night, and now the bounciest curls danced on my shoulders.

“Are you starting to get thirsty little girl?” Papa asked.

“Yes, I am, but *Tia Georgine* always has orange soda in her refrigerator.”

We didn’t serve soda at our house except when we had company, or sometimes on our birthdays. On those special occasions the delivery man brought a whole case of Nehi soda, twelve bottles in different flavors. I liked the cream soda best, but there were usually just two of those, and they disappeared fast. That was okay because I liked all the flavors. There was a case now sitting in our cellar, where it would stay cool. I was getting thirstier and thirstier, just thinking about it. Luckily, we were very close. I knew, because I could see the sparkling blue water of Mount Hope Bay.

Tia Georgine and Uncle Mac lived near the water in a very nice house. It was so special that there was an upstairs and a downstairs. Company always sat downstairs, and that’s where we visited. My cousins Eddie and Gracie were there when we arrived, but they didn’t want to stay inside, and *Tia Georgine* said they

could play outside with their friends. They were much older than I was and didn't make a fuss over my dress and veil like *Tia* did. I didn't mind it when they left.

I took my gloves off so they wouldn't get soiled, and sat down. Just as I thought, *Tia* asked me if I wanted an orange soda. I remembered my manners and said, "Yes, thank you."

She opened her refrigerator and brought out sodas for Papa, Uncle Mac and me.

"You keep those sodas here," Uncle Mac said with a merry crinkle in his eyes. "I've got something special for Joe, waiting in the other room." Papa chuckled. I wondered what could be better than soda.

Papa followed Uncle Mac while *Tia* Georgine poured my soda in a glass. She didn't take any for herself, because she said she was too fat. I thought she looked nice with her pretty flowered dress, so light and airy that you could almost see through it.

"Would you like to see my upstairs rooms?" *Tia* asked. I had visited them once before, but it was all so beautiful, I said I'd like to see them again. I left my soda on the counter and we climbed the stairs. *Tia* Georgine was huffing and puffing when we got to the top. She opened the door and we walked into a furniture store. At least it looked that way because everything was so perfect and untouched, like a museum. There were crocheted doilies on the arms and backs of the velvet davenport and matching chairs. The dining room table had a lace tablecloth that almost touched the floor. The lamps were golden and when *Tia* turned the lights on, I couldn't see any dust or fingerprints. Nothing was torn or scratched, like at our house.

"*Tia* Georgine. How do you keep your house so beautiful?" I asked in wonder.

"Oh, we never use this furniture. It's just for show. We live downstairs where it's cooler."

Imagine having so many rooms, that you could have a whole upstairs, and not ever need to use it. We could sure use some of those rooms in our house. With baby Rita we now had six children in our family. *Tia* Georgine and Uncle Mac had only two children. They must be rich, I decided.

After we looked at everything, we closed the door and went downstairs so I could finish my soda. Through the window I could see Papa and Uncle Mac standing outside talking. Papa had his back to me but Uncle Mac had a serious look on his face. *Tia* Georgine noticed his worried face and said, "Time for us to join your Papa."

Tia took my empty glass while I slipped on my gloves. We walked outside and as we got closer I heard Papa say, "Well, at least the Germans have surrendered. Now we can concentrate on the Philippines." They were talking about the war.

Tia Georgine clapped her hands and said brightly, "Enough war talk. Don't we have a surprise for our little Dolly?"

"Oh, right," said Uncle Mac. He was so tall he had to stoop down to look into my eyes. "I thought I'd drive you and your Papa back home in my new car. Would you like that?"

Would I? Now I really felt special because Uncle Mac drove a shiny, black Cadillac. Papa always said, "Your Uncle Mac loves his big cars."

I was about to follow Papa and Uncle Mac to the car, when *Tia* Georgine said, "Wait a minute. I almost forgot."

And she rushed back into the house. When she returned she was breathing funny and making wheezing noises. Uncle Mac moved close and put his arm around her shoulder.

"You know you shouldn't hurry," he said. "What was so important?"

"This," she said, and pressed a dollar into my gloved hand. She hugged me, and I smelled perfume, as if the flowers on her dress were real. I waved good-bye, and went with Papa and Uncle Mac to his shiny car.

Papa held open the back door, while I sat down carefully on the leather seat. I spread my dress around me, so it wouldn't wrinkle, and felt my hair to make sure my veil was still straight. After Papa got in, we waved through the window, and drove away. Only then did I open my tightly closed hand. When I spread out my fingers, my eyes nearly popped out of my head. This dollar bill had the number five on it. I closed my fingers around it fast, and kept it that way all the way home.



Dolly
1945



Mary
1947



Agnes Pimental Moniz
Mama (age 8)
and
Irene Pimental Moniz
Tia Irene (age 10)

1917

The War is Over

It is August 1945, a few days before Rita's first birthday. Everyone says she has the face of a doll. With her dark curls, rosy cheeks and long eyelashes, she looks just like those dolls in store windows that flutter their eyelashes when you tip them back and forth.

One Friday morning when the bread man delivers the usual four loaves of white bread, he stands by the kitchen door waiting to be paid. He notices Rita sitting in the high chair. He looks and cocks his head. She sits absolutely still, her big brown eyes staring right at him. Finally, he asks Mama, "Is that a doll or a real baby?" You can see he's unsure. That's how beautiful she is.

But she's also lazy, and hasn't started walking yet. Mama's belly is big again and it's not easy for her to carry Rita, so we take turns carrying her around.

"You're going to spoil her and she'll never walk," Mama says, but she doesn't sound like she means it.

This morning as I play with Rita I hear Alice's high heels racing down the steps. She knocks on the door and opens it before Mama can get to it. Alice frantically waves an American flag, and talks so fast we can hardly understand her.

"What did you say?" Papa asks. He looks excited and pays close attention.

"The war is over, the war is over." Her voice catches in her throat and she coughs.

"Slow down. Tell us everything," Papa says.

"I just heard it on the news. The Japanese signed some agreement on the battleship Missouri, and the war is over." Alice laughs and claps her hands. "That means Butchie will be home soon."

Alice's husband has been away so long, all I remember of him is his big smile and his dashing white sailor suit. She sure acts funny. I've never seen anyone laugh and cry at the same time.

She motions towards the window and we hear people cheering in the streets. Neighbors lean from their open windows waving American flags. Others dash out of their houses and bang pot lids, making such a racket. Mary and I rush outside. Everyone shouts at once.

"The war is over! The war is over!"

Someone throws confetti in the air and it floats over the happy people, like colorful snowflakes. It feels like the excitement of the Fourth of July parade, with the horses galloping and the American flag fluttering ahead of the band. We run back inside.

“Papa, Mama, the war really is over.”

“Yes *querida*,” Papa smiles. “This is a very special day.”

And he blesses himself with the sign of the cross. I’ve never seen him do that outside of church before. Mama shuffles from the window, and eases her tired body onto the kitchen chair. She places her hand over the melon-like bulge of her belly, as if she feels something. Papa notices and says, “We have so much to be thankful for. Isn’t life wonderful?” He gives Mama a soft look. She smiles back as if they share a secret.

“And in a few weeks, we’ll have even more to be happy about,” Papa continues.

I think he means school will be starting. I’ll be in third grade this year and Mary in first. Junior tells me Miss McArdle is mean and yells. I hope he’s kidding.

I soon learn it isn’t the start of school that makes Papa so happy. When we wake up on the morning of September sixth, Papa tells us we have a baby brother.

“And we’re going to name him Larry, in memory of my brother.”

We never met Papa’s brother because he died in the Azores of typhoid fever when he was sixteen. That’s only two years older than George is now. After four girls in a row, it’s good to have another boy. We can’t wait for Mama to come home with the new baby.

It feels strange starting back to school without Mama to get us ready. Mornings are disorganized, and we’re sometimes late for school. Junior was right about Miss McArdle. She walks by my desk and stands still, like a tall building. Her frog eyes stare at me as if she would like me to disappear. Junior was in her class four years ago, and I think she still remembers how naughty he was. The war may be over, but I feel as if I’m in a daily battle with my teacher.

“You Silva’s are nothing but trouble,” she says one morning when I’m late again. She pinches my ear and leads me toward my desk, as if I couldn’t find it by myself. It makes her angry when I’m tardy, but I can’t help that. Without Mama to remind us, Mary and I start playing and forget to notice the time. It will be better when Mama comes home.

Saturday Morning

It's an early Saturday morning in September, and the house is quiet. Mama's still in the hospital with baby brother Larry, and we're being lazy. My bedroom is close to the kitchen, and I am slowly awakened by a bubbling, rhythmic sound—bloop-bloop, bloop-bloop. Along with that sound is a wonderful, unmistakable aroma.



Papa is making coffee in the aluminum pot on the gas stove. I picture the light brown liquid burbling in the tiny glass dome of the lid, and decide that Papa needs company.

I slip out of bed, hit the cold linoleum floor, and dash to the warm kitchen. The old wood-stove, now converted to oil, keeps the kitchen cozy. Every morning, the first thing Papa does is check the oil container that sits in a metal ring in back of the stove. If the level is low, he goes to the cellar for a full jug and keeps it nearby. When he tips the container in place and the oil feeds into the stove, it makes a gurgling sound like gulping water on a hot day.

By the time I get up, the coffee is perking, the kitchen is warm and Papa is fast at work making toast. I slide my chair to the kitchen table and patiently wait.

"Hi sleepyhead," Papa says with a wink. "Ready for breakfast?"

I nod my head in answer, and watch Papa move to an inner music while he works. He keeps one eye on the coffee pot, so the grounds don't boil over and give the coffee a bitter taste. Then he empties a loaf of white bread from the cellophane wrapper, and gets started.

He places two slices in the toaster, and when they pop up he butters them from the brick left on the counter last night to soften. He's generous with the butter and slathers it on the toast while it's still hot. He toasts the whole loaf, returning the slices to the original wrapper. Steam builds up inside and the bread softens.

By now my stomach is growling, and I hug my feet to my chest. As soon as the sack is filled with toast, Papa gets the coffee. He pours milk into my mug with two heaping teaspoons of sugar and just enough coffee to flavor the milk. He pours himself a cup with milk and sugar, but not as much milk as in mine. Then he sits down next to me and lets out a happy sigh.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” he asks mischievously, tugging on my pigtails.

I smile and carefully open the bread wrapper to remove the first slice. It flops over in my small hand, and I fold it in half. I take the first bite, and the melted butter oozes on my lips and dribbles on my chin. I like this quiet time with Papa and feel special, but it doesn't last long. Soon my younger sister pokes her head into the kitchen to see what she is missing.

“Mary,” Papa says, “come get some toast before Dolly eats it all up.” He squeezes my shoulder, as he gets up to fix Mary's coffee, and I know he's only kidding. Mary gives me a lopsided grin as she reaches for the sack of toast. When Papa again joins us, the three of us sit at the table in a dreamy quiet. The only sounds are the gurgling stove, slurps of coffee, and licks of buttery fingers. When the others awaken, our moment of magic will have to be shared. For now, the kitchen and Papa are ours alone.

Teresa's Haircut



After spending the afternoon together, Alice brings Teresa downstairs. Mama allows Teresa extra time with Alice because soon she will be going to California to meet Butchie. His ship is headed there, and Alice says she's not waiting any longer to see him.

"I'll miss my sweet girl," Alice says, while stroking the satiny pink bow in Teresa's dark hair. It sits as pretty as Christmas ribbon-candy on top of her curls.

Teresa's eyes sparkle in a dimpled smile, and she reminds me of a well-fed cat sunning in a window. I feel a little meanness inside me when Teresa slips her hand into Alice's, as if they are best friends. I'm almost glad Alice is going away. Sometimes, she invites Mary and me upstairs, but we know Teresa is her favorite.

“Will you be able to see Butchie when you get there?” Mama asks, shifting the new baby in her lap while she feeds him his bottle.

“I don’t know, but I do know I’ll see him quicker in California than I will sitting here at home.”

She smooths her hand over Teresa’s hair and primps the ribbon.

“Well, time for me to get back upstairs. I’ve got packing to do,” she sighs.

We hear her tapping heels climb the steps and fade away as she reaches her door.

Shortly after Mama comes home with baby Larry, Papa moves the double bed into the parlor, and arranges the two cribs into our old bedroom. With the new sleeping arrangement, Teresa now shares the bed with Mary and me. Because she is younger, Mary and I tell her she has to sleep in the middle. If it weren’t so crowded it would actually be a good arrangement, because it keeps Mary and me from stretching our legs and kicking one another. Mary and I complain of the heat and closeness, but Teresa lies still as a wooden soldier, hands by her side. After a few days we settle into our new positions, and Mama breathes a sigh of relief.

Teresa seems lost with Alice gone. She wanders around from room to room then sits quietly with her doll in her lap, waiting. Mary and I are in school, but Teresa is four and won’t go until next year. She doesn’t understand why Alice doesn’t come for her, to watch television and have tea parties. Her only playmate is Rita, who just turned one and isn’t much company.

One day after George gets home from high school, he tells Teresa it’s her turn for a treat at Pat’s Candy Store. She looks up at George and beams. It’s been a long time since we have seen the dimple in her smile. From the kitchen window I watch her slip her little hand in George’s large one, as she skips across the street.

When they return, he sets her on the top porch step with her Sugar Daddy sucker, and comes inside. I pull him aside, and ask who chose the sucker.

“I suppose you want the whole story.” I roll my eyes and give him a look as if to say, “of course I want to hear what went on.”

“I do have homework, you know, but just because it’s you ...” I can tell he’s only too happy to tell someone about his good deed, because he sits me down beside him and starts from the beginning.

“From the minute we entered Pat’s store and the doorbell jingled, Teresa never stopped smiling. Once inside, she made a beeline to the large glass case filled

with taffy kits, bubble gum, Sugar Daddy's and strips of paper with pastel sugar dots. Pat said he'd be right with us, giving her all the time she needed.

"While Teresa looked, Pat moved the life-sized poster of Little Miss Sunbeam, closer to the door, where customers would see it as soon as they entered. Then he stacked loaves of Sunbeam bread on shelves next to it. When he was finished, he went behind the glass case to help Teresa with her candy selection."

"It didn't take her long to choose the Sugar Daddy. When Pat asked her if she wanted it in a bag, Teresa put out her hand to take it, and smiled with such joy that her dimples really deepened. While I paid for the candy, Teresa walked up to the poster. Even though we don't buy Sunbeam bread, Teresa sure recognized the face with the big smile and golden curls tied up with a ribbon."

"'You know,' Pat said, observing Teresa next to the poster, 'your little sister looks just like Little Miss Sunbeam.'"

Later, when George told the rest of the family what Pat had said, we all agreed. Except for the color of her dark curls, Teresa, with her dimples did look like Miss Sunbeam. We would all recall Pat's words a few weeks later, and feel heartsick.

Mama's been too busy to spend the extra time on Teresa's hair. The pink ribbon has disappeared, and her curls have become tangled. When we come home for lunch, Mama asks me to braid her hair to keep it out of her face. I'm not very gentle when I comb out the snarls. Teresa doesn't complain. She's happy to have someone comb her hair.

Meanwhile, the school nurse has been called to check the children for head lice. Mary and I both get notes telling Mama to buy a special shampoo and fine tooth comb to use on our long hair. Before Mama gets a chance to treat our heads, the inevitable happens, and Teresa starts scratching.

Even in her sleep, she scratches. Sores develop. Mama trims her nails and uses the special shampoo, but it stings and Teresa cries. All night long, we hear her. The sores bleed and worsen. Mama cuts away the hair around the sores, and applies a cream she gets from Doctor Costa, but Teresa can't seem to stop. More sores appear.

In desperation, Mama takes her to the barber. Her beautiful hair is shaved off completely. She looks like those French ladies in the newspaper, who have their

heads shaved. Papa says it was their punishment for being too friendly with the German soldiers. It doesn't seem fair because Teresa didn't do anything wrong.

I think of the day Pat said Teresa looked like Miss Sunbeam, as I watch Mama smear the medicated cream on the sores. Between the sores, short bristles pop up like pine needles in the snow. She doesn't look like little Miss Sunbeam now.

Later that evening I overhear Mama talking to Papa.

"The barber felt so bad, he didn't even charge me," she says sniffing, and wipes her eyes with her apron.

Papa pats Mama's shoulder. "Ah, Agnes, it had to be done."

I know what Papa says is true, but it still makes me feel sad, and my heart cries inside.

Doctor Costa advises Mama to have Teresa sit in the sun as much as possible, to dry out the sores. As soon as the sun reaches the front porch, Mama puts on her sweater, and tells her to sit on the steps. Teresa draws her knees to her chest, and rests her rounded swan's neck on her clasped arms. It looks like she's bowing to the sun. When the school children come home for lunch and pass by our house, they stare at her. One brave girl asks, "What's that white stuff you have on your head, and why did you cut off your hair?"

Teresa shrinks further into her sweater, as if to make her body disappear. When we come home from school, we tell Mama Teresa is crying. Mama tells us to call her in for lunch.

When the school children ask us about Teresa sunning on the porch, it embarrasses us. Now when the school bell rings for lunchtime, Mary and I rush up the hill and scoop Teresa inside without waiting for Mama to tell us.

Finally, the sores heal, and Teresa doesn't have to sit outside in the sun. I wonder what Alice will say about all this when she returns. I don't think I'll be jealous of Teresa any more.

Magic of Radio

Winter evenings have a special magic, owing to the enchantment of radio. When darkness seeps through the frosted windows, my brothers, George and Junior, and Mary and I, gather together in the parlor, which doubles as the girls' bedroom. The heat, from the coal-burning stove with the isinglass door, warms the four of us as we lay across the double bed, like fence-post shadows in the snow. Papa sits on a chair close to the radio, and keeps his eyes on the stove.

At the creepy sound of rusty hinges on **The Squeaky Door**, we shiver with excitement. We lay close enough to feel secure, but don't touch. With eyes closed, we pretend we are alone. As the organ music crescendos, we tense to the raspy invisible voice reminding us that "crime does not pay." The message is similar on **The Shadow** and **Light's Out**, and we are reassured to know that good triumphs over evil.

On Sunday nights when the **Jack Benny Show** comes on, we eagerly anticipate the humor between the irreverent Rochester and the tightwad

Mr. Benny. We shift positions so we can see the expressions on Papa's face. In this episode, Mr. Benny explains to Rochester about some housekeeping he wants done before a guest arrives. We listen, and watch Papa.

When the expected disaster occurs, laughter erupts from his throat in squeaky blasts. He tries to hold in the laughter because he doesn't want to miss the next line. His face crinkles and his blue eyes become mere slits in his red face. Then he blows his nose, mops his wet eyes with his handkerchief, and clears his throat. Finally, he is quiet until Rochester's next outburst. Papa's delight sprinkles upon us like glitter from the stars.

When I was three or four, I remember squeezing behind the floor model Philco radio, to look for the people whose voices I heard. I expected to see tiny people living inside the back of the radio. What I did see were glass bulbs with thin wires in them. I couldn't imagine where the people were that made Papa laugh so hard.

Now it is one of those lazy Sundays, and I relax on the bed, flanked by my two older brothers and my sister Mary. Papa sits in his chair nearby, and we wait for the **Jack Benny Show** to begin. A glowing fire crackles in the coal stove, emitting rays of warmth across our backs and legs. Spicy smells drift in from the pantry. And then Mama's voice breaks the mood.

“Dolly,” she calls, “I need tomatoes for dinner. Go downstairs and get me a jar.”

She stands by the gas stove preparing chicken. I don’t want to leave my cozy space, but when Mama gives an order, I know better than to question her. Besides, one of the understood rules in this gathering is absolute quiet, except to laugh at jokes. So I reluctantly slide out of my spot, and Mary oozes in like water finding its own level.

She raises her head, and flashes me a devilish grin. I think it’s not fair that I have to go for the tomatoes, just because I’m nearly eight and she’s six. I know if I dared to ask, Mama would say that I’m the oldest. But that’s not really true. George is fourteen and Junior is twelve. Why can’t they go for the tomatoes? Because I’m the oldest girl. But I keep my thoughts to myself as I leave the warmth of the room, and head towards the dark cellar stairs.

Going to the cellar alone is a scary thing, especially at night. I open the door at the top of the steps, and pat the dusty stone wall on my left, never forgetting that I have to stay on the left. The old wooden stairs curve downward in a spiral, like thin wedges of a pie. One misstep and I could slip and fall onto the hard packed dirt floor. I feel along the bumpy wall with the perceptive fingers of a blind person. I tell myself that those scurrying noises are just the chips of crumbling mortar falling off the wall, coating my fingers with powder.

When I reach what I think is the last step, I tentatively stretch out my foot to make sure I am on solid ground. Papa’s work bench, with all his tools, is to my left. I get a whiff of leather and other earthy smells from his worn work shoes. I inch forward four steps towards the middle of the room. Flapping my hand high in the air, I grope for the pull string, and yank hard. Bright light bursts from the swinging light bulb, blinding me for a moment. After a second or two my eyes adjust, and that creepy cellar feels familiar once again.

I recognize the shadowy mound by the workbench as nothing more than the wicker doll carriage that Papa has been working on. He often brings home broken toys that people throw away as trash. Papa never throws anything out. Sooner or later, he finds a use for things that others consider worthless. I remember the day he brought the doll carriage home.

Mary and I followed him down the cellar stairs. Papa set the carriage on his workbench and shook his head with disbelief.

“There is so much waste in our country,” he said. “This doll carriage is in perfect condition except for a missing wheel.”

He paused a moment and had a gleam in his eyes. "And I just happen to have one in my box that should fit perfectly." He looked at our expectant faces.

"Some lucky girl is going to be very happy when I'm finished with this carriage."

My birthday will be in a few weeks, and I secretly hope that he means me. But Papa gives nothing away with his smiling eyes.

Besides fixing things, Papa uses the cellar to kill chickens. I witnessed that spectacle for the first time yesterday, when Papa wrung the neck of the chicken that was now in the oven, waiting for my jar of tomatoes.

I remember Papa came home from work, changed his clothes, ate his snack and went out to feed the chickens. I followed close behind while he scattered corn. He seemed to be checking the hens very carefully. Then he leaned over and with one swift motion, snatched one from the cluster. Papa carried the flustered hen into the cellar, and I watched fascinated as he gentled her by stroking her feathered head with his fingertips.

"What's wrong with that chicken, Pa?"

"Nothing's wrong with her."

"Then what are you going to do with her?" I asked puzzled.

"Well little girl, I'll tell you" he said, still stroking the chicken's head.

"Your Mama needs some meat for tomorrow's dinner, and this chicken is it"

"But, why that chicken?"

"You sure do ask a lot of questions, but that's good. It's how you learn."

By now the chicken was almost dozing in Papa's arm.

"You see, chickens are for two things, laying eggs and Sunday dinner."

"So, this one isn't laying eggs?" I offered.

"Now you're cooking with gasoline."

Papa always says that when you give the correct answer. It makes me feel smart, like when I get a hundred on my spelling test.

"If I were you, I'd go sit on that bottom step out of the way, because things are going to happen fast, and it's not going to be pretty. I wouldn't want you getting your clothes messed up."

And quick as lightning, Papa stretched and twisted that chicken's neck. He slipped a twine noose around the hen's feet, and dangled her upside down from the vise on the workbench. Next he picked up a large knife, with a flat blade like an axe, and chopped off her head. This seemed to revive the chicken, and when Papa

released the noose, the headless chicken charged around the cellar floor until her heart stopped and she plopped over dead.

Droplets of blood trailed everywhere. Papa briskly wiped his hand on the front of his stained pants as if to say “well, that job is done” then picked up the stilled chicken, and tucked it under his left arm. He walked around the floor following the bloody trail, and mixed it up in the dirt with his shoes.

“Let’s take this chicken up to your mother.” he said. “She’ll know what to do with it.”

He reached up for the string to turn the light off. Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the dusty cobwebbed window, and guided us up the stairs. I walked ahead so that I could open the door at the top of the steps.

Yesterday’s memory clears from my brain, as I blink my eyes in the glare of the swinging light bulb. I think about Papa being so gentle with that hen, and the next minute twisting her neck. I try to understand these two confusing actions. I look around for the droplets of blood from yesterday’s slaughter, but don’t see any evidence of it.

Then I glance sideways towards the workbench where Papa’s shoes rest, and notice the splattered red blotches. I stare at the shoes and remember. I shake my head to erase yesterday’s image. Why am I wasting time thinking of all this now when I should be getting the tomatoes?

I step quickly towards the storage room on the right. The room on the left, with the metal hasp fastening the door closed, holds the large oil drum, and we know not to go in there. To the right is where the canning jars of stewed tomatoes, pickled onions, and red and green finger-peppers are lined up like so many bright banners on sagging wooden shelves.

This room has a small ground-level window where coal is dumped to the waiting bin below. It is dark outside, but I can make out the lumpy silhouettes of coal, and smell the sooty dust. The wooden framed doorway allows just enough light to dimly outline the shadowed jars. I feel along the shelves, and carry out what I think might be a jar of tomatoes to the open doorway. The light reveals pickled onions. I go back into the storage room for another jar.

Above my head I hear Mama’s tired feet scraping the kitchen floor. The familiar sound feels comforting. I know I must hurry because she is waiting. I bring out another jar, and wipe the dusty layer off with my fingers. This time I see the plump, red tomatoes.

I walk towards the light bulb, riveting my eyes on the bottom step so that I can fix it in my mind before I pull the string that muffles me in darkness. I grope

the wall now on my right, and ascend the wooden stairs. When I reach the top step, my racing heart slows down. I quickly open the door into the warmth and light of the kitchen, and the smells of dinner. Mama's face is flushed as she comes away from the roasting pan, and reaches for the jar of tomatoes.

"What took you so long? Were you daydreaming down there?" she asks in a voice that seems more exasperated than angry. She cleans the dust off the jar, and pours the tomatoes over the chicken. She replaces the lid on the roaster, and closes the oven door.

I hear laughter in the parlor. Rochester is protesting to Mr. Benny, who insists on playing the same scratchy tune on his violin. I look with longing towards the nestled shapes on the bed. Mama notices. "There are potatoes here that need peeling." She wipes her hands on her apron, and motions for me to help her carry the potatoes to the kitchen table, where we will be closer to the radio.

Without a word, Mama hands me a knife, and we peel the potatoes together. We're just in time. I hear Mr. Benny tell Rochester that he needs more money. Papa loves it when Mr. Benny goes down to the vault and encounters the ancient man who guards his money. I wait for the explosion of laughter. I know it is coming.

Old Coats

Fall is in the air and the evenings are definitely colder. The heat from the kitchen stove doesn't reach us in the parlor, which is now the girls' bedroom, and it's a battle to find enough blankets for the three of us. One evening I slide into bed and pull up on the blanket.

"Stop pulling the blankets on your side," Mary hisses at me.

"What do you mean? You're the one who's hogging them," I snap back.

Teresa lies in the center, sound asleep.

Mama is mending Junior's pants in the kitchen and overhears us. She walks into our room, and I prepare myself for a scolding. Instead she opens the old wooden wardrobe where she keeps a supply of woolen coats. I don't know where she got those old coats, because I've never seen Papa wear them. They exhale mothballs and stale air, but they are also heavy and long. On top of a thin blanket they add just the extra warmth we need. I like to pretend they belonged to one of my grandfathers, whom I never knew.

Now Mama pulls out two coats and places them over us. When she moves to my side of the bed I turn toward her, and my nose meets her apron. Soup smells from supper linger in the soft cotton. She leans over to brush my hair with her hand, and sighs. I think she sometimes feels she's so busy with the two babies, that she doesn't have enough time for us. But Mary and I have one another, and Mama is always near.

She stands there a moment longer then asks in a low whisper, "Is that better?"

"Um hum," I answer, feeling drowsy.

Mary rolls over on her side, careful not to disturb Teresa. Mama tucks the coats around our feet making us feel snug and cozy.

"Now, get right to sleep," she says. "You both have school in the morning."

Then she adds briskly, "And I don't want to hear any more squabbling in here tonight."

She closes the door part way, turns off the kitchen light and goes to bed. The last sound I hear as I drift off to sleep is the slapping of her slippers across the linoleum floor.

Papa Gives Notice

You don't need a clock to know it's time for Papa to come home from his job at Firestone. You just watch Mama. Eyes focused on the newspaper ads, she suddenly glances at the wall clock and gasps in surprise. She hastily refolds the paper, and stuffs the grocery list into her apron pocket. Her stumpy legs, laced with varicose veins, catapult her from the kitchen into the bathroom. Then the ritual begins.

First she washes the newspaper print from her fingers and splashes warm water on her face. Then she brushes her teeth, grimacing when she runs her finger over their unevenness. Checking her reflection in the medicine-cabinet mirror, she runs a quick comb through her tightly permed curls. She tucks the bits of grey hair behind her ears and near the nape of her neck, so they aren't noticeable. Sometimes she ties a ribbon around her hair to hold it back. It softens her face and makes her look pretty.

Next, Mama looks out the window to check on my brothers who play marbles in the backyard. Rita and baby Larry are napping, and Mary and I play with the plastic dishes of our tea set. Teresa sits quietly nearby.

Once we are all accounted for, Mama prepares for Papa's snack. She sweeps the flat of her hand across the oilcloth on the table, and brushes breakfast crumbs into the cupped palm of her other hand. Next she sets Papa's place at the table, a large mug for coffee and six or seven milk-lunch crackers.

Mama reaches into the cupboard for the red bag of Eight O'clock coffee, and fills the battered aluminum pot with tap water. After the coffee is brewed on the gas stove in the pantry, she brings it to the kitchen and sets it on the back of the cast-iron stove to keep it warm. She changes her stained apron for a clean one, and ties it around her soft waist. As soon as Papa walks in, she will pour coffee in the white mug, add sugar and milk, and put the crackers in to soak. At first it appears the coffee will spill over, but the thick round crackers absorb the liquid like dry pens soak up ink.

Satisfied that all is ready, Mama cautions, "Now don't stand around and bother your father when he comes in. Remember he's been working hard all day and he's tired. Let him eat his snack in peace." What she really means is we shouldn't cling around the table and beg for spoonfuls of the softened crackers.

"Yes Mama," Mary and I chorus with wide-eyed innocence.

As Mama places a spoon and napkin on the table, we move out of the kitchen to play with our dishes in the adjoining parlor. We leave the door between

the rooms open. If we play quietly, maybe Mama will forget we are there, and we can listen to Papa talk about his day.

Papa brings the outside world home with him, and we breathe in his stories. When he talks about the men in the factory we listen for familiar names, and try to form a picture of how they all work together.

One of his stories is about how his friends tease him when they take a smoke break, and Papa keeps on working.

“Hey, Joe, slow down. You make us look bad,” they laugh.

“Maybe I’m going to have to start smoking so I can take a break, too,” Papa chuckles back.

That’s how he talks at work, but at home he tells Mama that cigarettes are too expensive to waste money on.

Since Papa was promoted to Supervisor, he doesn’t tell stories of joking with his friends. Today, when he walks into the kitchen and sets his lunch pail down, I can tell by his slow steps that something has changed.

He glances at the coffee and crackers but heads straight for his bedroom. When Mama follows him, Mary and I scoot into the kitchen to listen.

“Joe, how was your day?” Mama asks. Papa hunches over the edge of the bed, as if an invisible weight is on his shoulders. He struggles with the laces on his work shoes. Even his fingers move in slow motion.

“Joe, is everything alright?” Mama asks. She rubs his shoulder and says, “Come to the table. I have your coffee and crackers soaking.” Mama turns towards the kitchen, and Mary and I dart back to the parlor.

“I’ll be just a minute,” we hear him mumble. Papa lingers a while longer then changes into his yard clothes. I don’t think he even notices the three of us, as he reaches for his chair. He sits down, and rests his elbows by his coffee mug. After a few minutes, he takes a few bites then puts his spoon down. Mama sits in the chair across from him, her hands folded in her lap.

“I don’t know that being a super is such a good thing for me,” Papa says in a troubled voice.

“Why, not?” Mama asks. She clasps and unclasps her hands. The worry lines between her eyebrows furrow deeper, and she gives Papa her full attention.

“I feel caught in the middle,” he responds.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, the guys aren’t quite so easygoing around me any more.”

“You just imagine that.”

"I don't think so." Papa takes a sip of coffee and a spoonful of crackers. He pauses then clears his throat. His tone changes as he continues. "And the big guys don't have the time of day for me, either." Papa puts his spoon down, and looks at Mama with tired eyes.

"And then there are the phone calls, all hours of the night when a machine breaks down." He raises his voice. "What am I knocking myself out for? A few extra dollars? I don't need this aggravation."

Mary and I stop all pretense of play. Teresa holds her doll close and doesn't move. Papa's loud voice scares us.

"But Joe, *mais dinheiro para ...*" Mama slips into Portuguese, her private language.

Papa stiffens. "More money! Is that all you care about? What about me and the pressure I'm under to drive the guys to work harder, and produce more? The same guys I was shooting the breeze with a few months ago, who now avoid me. Is that any kind of a life? Huh?"

Mama seems nervous and flustered. She bolts from the table, grabs the coffee pot and pours more coffee into Papa's almost-full mug. She returns the pot to the stove then opens the refrigerator for the milk. Before she can add it to the coffee, Papa says, "Agnes, sit." I see him rest his hand over Mama's, as if to stop her restless activity. He looks at her and says in a firm voice, "Agnes, I'm gonna give my notice. Let them find another sucker. I want my old job back. No more super."

"Don't be hasty, Joe," Mama says in English. Then she speaks in Portuguese. Even though I listen intently, I don't understand. Papa jerks his hand away, and I can tell by the stormy look on his face that Mama has upset him.

I want to shout, "Leave him alone! Let Papa eat his snack in peace, like you asked us to do." My anger surprises me. I shift my position in the doorway, careful not to make a sound.

Mama stands up and says something harsh. Papa explodes. He pushes the cup away, and gets up so quickly his chair tips backwards, crashing to the floor. He jerks it back in place, storms out of the kitchen, and slams the door behind him. Mary and I look at one another and then at Teresa. Her eyes are big and round like a frightened deer.

The napping children are startled awake, and Rita calls out for Mama. Our peaceful afternoon is shattered by Firestone, a place which up to now meant funny stories of Papa's outside world.

"Now what did I say?" Mama mutters to herself. She wipes up the spilled coffee in repetitive circling motions, as if to erase her hasty words. With a worried

look on her face, she moves heavily towards the bedroom to soothe the crying babies.

I tug on Mary's dress sleeve and nod towards the kitchen door. We leave Teresa behind, and slither out the kitchen like wisps of smoke through a keyhole. No longer wanting to remain inside with that jarring silence, we scamper towards the backyard. We know Papa will be feeding the chickens and checking on his plants. Papa is always happy in his garden. He'll make everything right again.

Corsets and Other Restrictions

Spring of 1946 arrives with irises budding in the front yard, seedlings sprouting in the window trays, and Mama's corset losing the battle with the soft flesh of her belly. Larry is eight months old, but Mama's shape doesn't look much different from before he was born. It's time for Mama's yearly visit to the Corset Lady.

Last year when I was eight, Mama let me accompany her for the first time. I was careful to mind my p's and q's, as Mama likes to say, hoping to return this year.

One afternoon after she puts Larry down for his nap Mama says, "Dolly, go wash your face and hands, then let me check your hair." I think I know what's coming so I hop right to it. I bring the wet comb to Mama, and she rakes perfect lines on either side of the center part in my hair.

"We don't have time to redo your pigtails," she says, "but they'll do".

"George," she calls out to my oldest brother. "Put those comics away and listen to me. I need you to watch the children while I go someplace. The baby's sleeping, but you need to keep an eye on the others. I'm taking Dolly with me."

That last sentence gets his attention. He gives me a deadpan look that tells me he's not at all happy about doing what's usually my job. But he knows better than to complain to Mama.

After glancing once more around the kitchen to see where everyone is, Mama nods to me to follow her. It's a treat to be outdoors on such a sunny afternoon. We close the gate behind us and start out for Fountain Street. It's only three blocks away, but there's so much to see. As I walk beside Mama I feel like skipping, but I don't want her to think I'm a little kid.

We start to cross Broadway, a very busy street, and Mama reaches for my hand. The L&B grocery store is on this corner but it's not where we shop, unless they have a special on bread or peanut butter. Now customers pass through the white door with red trim and make the bell clang each time the door opens. When we reach the other side of Broadway, Mama drops my hand. She needs both hands to carry the old bulky corset, stuffed inside a paper bag.

On the next block is McDonough Middle School, a massive brick building surrounded by black asphalt. It looks worn out and grim. Not a flower or blade of grass is in sight. I'm glad I don't go to Junior High for another two years. Once past the school, we make a right turn and go up the hill, where every house has a small fenced yard with budding flowers.

As soon as Mama knocks, the corset lady answers the door. She opens it wide and welcomes us in, a pleased expression on her face. They exchange words in Portuguese but the only one I recognize is *senhora*, which means lady or ma'am. It's the response we're expected to give Mama when she leans out the kitchen window to call us in for supper. All our friends are allowed to say "what?" when their moms call. Even though we are embarrassed to answer Mama in Portuguese, we know the rule. We never answer "what".

"I see you brought your friend with you," she says to Mama with a twinkle in her eye, and they laugh together. I'm not Mama's friend, I'm her little girl. But I don't say anything.

Mama hands the bag with the corset to the lady, and directs me to an overstuffed chair. I sit quietly with my feet dangling over the edge, and she goes into the bedroom to undress. The corset lady opens the bag, and makes clicking noises with her tongue and teeth as she examines the frayed corset with the stays falling out.

She brings it closer to a sunny window. Her thick black hair shines like wet tar in the sunlight. It twists in a soft knot at the nape of her neck, and accentuates the lace collar of her navy dress. I notice that her shape and Mama's are just alike, stiff and round like pickle barrels. It's the corset that shapes them, because the laces pull everything in tight.

The corset must be very uncomfortable because Mama takes hers off as soon as she gets home from church. That's one of the few times she wears it. Once when Doctor Costa visited Mama and the new baby, he said she should wear the corset all the time.

"With all these babies, you'll get a hernia if you go around without some support," he told Mama in his gruff voice.

Mama said she had no time for a hernia, and Doctor Costa laughed. His laugh sounded like a barking dog.

Now the *senhora* picks up her tape, and returns to the bedroom to take Mama's measurements. I hear their murmuring voices through the open door, like two friends talking about everyday things, not just corsets. At home Mama is so busy with seven children, she doesn't have time for friends.

After the measurements are taken, Mama gets dressed. It has been so peaceful here, and quiet. It seems no one else lives in this restful house. Our house is noisy with the loud voices of my brothers, and fussy cries of the babies. There

are always chores to do. Here I don't have to do a thing but sit and listen to the ticking clock on the mantle. I'm lucky Mama brought me along.

As Mama comes out of the room, the corset lady compliments me on being a good girl, and I see Mama smile. Even though she doesn't say it, I know she's proud of my good manners. *Senhora* tells Mama when the new corset will be ready, and we say good-bye.

We walk down the hill and past McDonough School. It makes me think of my school friends, and I wonder if Mama and the corset lady went to school together.

"Is the corset lady your friend?" I ask, as we walk side by side. After a few minutes, when I almost think she's not going to answer, Mama says, "You could say that." It's one of those answers I'm not sure what it means. I try a different question.

"Did you have friends when you went to school?"

"Of course I did, just like you do."

"Well, where are they now?" I ask, feeling braver.

"I don't know. Probably raising a family like I am," she says.

"How come you don't visit one another?"

Mama laughs, but it doesn't sound like a funny laugh. "Who has time for that?" she says.

I mull that over as we walk. I remain quiet, hoping that if I don't disturb her thoughts, Mama will continue. Suddenly Mama stops, gives me a long look and says, "I'll tell you about friends. You remember McDonough School that we just passed?"

"Um hum," I answer, not wanting to break the spell.

"I graduated from there and had one year of high school. At fourteen, I had to leave school to work in the sewing mills. I always wanted to finish high school, and get my diploma. So did my three girlfriends. We worked all day, and in the evenings, walked to night school together until we graduated. We were determined to get out of the sweatshops."

"My house was closest to the school," she continued, "so my friends picked up one another along the way until they reached my house. We had so much fun, laughing and joking, just like you do with your friends. We dreamed about what we would do once we got our diplomas. I always had a good head for figures, and thought I'd like to work in an office, doing the books."

This was a new idea, my mother young and laughing with girlfriends. It was a part of Mama I knew very little about. I wanted to hear more.

"What happened after you and your friends graduated?" I asked.

“Because I was so quick with numbers, my mother decided I should now handle the money in the family.” I could hear the pride in Mama’s voice. “In fact, my Papa, your grandfather, handed me his paycheck to pay the bills. Even though I wasn’t the oldest girl in the family, I was the first to have a high school diploma.”

I was amazed. Imagine a father giving his daughter his paycheck to manage.

“Did you leave the sewing mill and work in an office?”

“I was going to, but then I met your father and we got married.”

“How about your friends. Did they leave the sewing mills?”

“I don’t know. We lost touch.”

“How come?”

“That’s just the way it was.” Mama’s voice sounded far away, remembering. “Friends are for when you’re young. When you marry, you have your family.”

I thought about that for a while. It seemed a big sacrifice, giving up your friends when you got married. Visiting a corset lady once a year, wasn’t the same as spending time with your friends. We were nearly home now. I didn’t want Mama to feel bad, so I stopped asking questions. I could feel her glancing at me, but we walked the rest of the way without talking. I had a lot to think about.

Mama's Fur Coat

When Mama lowers the veil of her hat before stepping out the door for church, she's the rabbit that pops out of the magician's hat, an incredible surprise, completely changed.

All week long we see the unrestrained Mama, pendulous bosom and soft doughy mounds. Buttons at the neckline of her dresses are yanked out, and sleeves cut so short they become big, gaping armholes. Mama is always hot. Over the mutilated dress, Mama wears an apron with pockets for her many lists, and a bib top that fails dismally to rein in her bosom. This attire, along with her white lace-up shoes with the two inch chunk heels, is her daily uniform as she toils in a small pantry, preparing meals for a family of nine.

On Sunday mornings, Mama dresses for church in the privacy of her bedroom, where she tucks soft flesh into her rigid corset, and reshapes it into a firm mass. Through the door which is partially ajar, we hear grunting noises as she struggles into that medieval garment of laces and metal stays.

Once the garment is secure, Mama eases her slip over her head, careful not to mess the tightly permed curls. This is followed by her Sunday dress. Decent but immobilized, Mama pokes her head through the bedroom door, nylon stockings in hand.

"Dolly," she calls, "come here. I need your help." I follow her back into the bedroom where she hands me her stockings. She sits on the edge of the bed, and I slip them over her stubby toes up to her knees, where she reaches down to pull them up the rest of the way. Mama fastens the two front garters and stands, while I do the back ones. She sits again while I help with her shoes. Church shoes don't have laces to loosen, so I guide her puffy feet in with a shoehorn.

Now Mama stands stiffly and peeks over her shoulder to see that her seams are straight. She smooths down the front of her dress, pleased that not a bulge is in sight. Satisfied, she taps her heels towards the parlor entry.

She opens the wardrobe door, and carefully removes the old sheet that protects the white fox collar of her winter coat. She wraps herself in the coat, letting the plush fur fall like a mantle around her shoulders. Losing herself in the feel of luxury, she turns her head



first one way and then the other. When she brushes the fur to fluff it up, a wisp floats past my nose, and makes me sneeze.

"Careful," Mama says, stepping back. "Don't stand too close."

Mama is afraid I'll ruin her beautiful olive green coat, but I remember to cover my mouth and nose with my hand.

Like a turtle in its shell, Mama hunches her shoulders and sinks her head into the softness, just for a moment. Briskly, as though she's wasted enough time preening, she reaches for her winter white woolen hat. She removes it from the tissue in its box, places it on her head just so, then fastens it with a large hat pin. I wonder why she never sticks herself, as she doesn't ever use a mirror. Checking to see that her pearl earrings are still fastened, she gives them a final twist.

"Doesn't that hurt when you tighten the screws?" I ask in amazement.

"No, I only tighten them a little so they don't fall off," she reassures me.

At last, Mama slides on her gloves, scrunching them at the wrist. She reaches for the veil of her hat, brings it down over her face, past her wire-rimmed glasses and under her chin. Before our very eyes, Mama becomes someone else.

Papa sits in his chair and pretends to read the newspaper. As Mama is about to leave, he bolts up from his chair, and with a glint in his eye sings out, "Ta da. Make way for Miss MacWilliam." That's his name for an elegant lady.

I look at Mama's veiled face and see her lips turn up in a smile. With a nod of her head she flounces out the door, leaving behind a faint scent of roses, and the mystery of Miss MacWilliam.

While Mama is in church we amuse ourselves with our dolls and tea set, and time quickly passes. Soon she returns. We look up from our play but don't stop. I watch Mama, and she's like a movie going backwards.

She thoughtfully removes the pin from her hat, and slowly walks towards the parlor entry wardrobe. She reaches for the hat box, places the hat inside, pats the tissue paper in place, and stands on tip toes to put it back on the shelf. Next she slips off her gloves, one finger at a time, then touches the fur collar with her fingertips. Reluctantly, she removes her coat. After hanging it up, she replaces the protective sheet around the collar, and firmly clicks the wardrobe door shut.

In her bedroom she changes into a flowered housedress. She calls me to help take off her shoes. I don't see the corset on the bed. I can tell she hasn't removed it because her dress fits nicely. She comes into the kitchen and ties on her apron.

"Well," she says to no one in particular, "guess I'll check on dinner."

Miss MacWilliam is gone for another week. Mama has returned.

Summer Chores

When George starts high school, his nightly chore of washing dishes skips right past Junior, who is responsible for doing the diapers, and passes on to me. I'm nine years old, weigh forty-five pounds and barely reach the counter. Nevertheless, on nights when George has a lot of homework, I'm expected to help. On these nights I go looking for the *banco*.

Originally, Papa made this wooden step-stool with a drawer, to store diapers. However, this same *banco* doubles as an extra back seat on the floor of the car when we take our Sunday rides. Now I stand on it to reach the sink. Even with the added height, my skinny arms barely reach into the pan, filled with sudsy water. It will be seven more years before radiators-- and the luxury of hot water-- replace the coal-stove in the parlor and the oil-stove in the kitchen. For now, when I lift a dish to rinse under the faucet, cold water runs down my arms, wets my dress and drips onto the linoleum floor.

"Move in closer to the sink," Mama admonishes me.

The wooden floor beneath the old linoleum is probably rotting from all the drips. Before I do dishes in the evening I jump up and down on the *banco* to test the floor. Mama comes to investigate.

"What are you doing now?" I hear the displeasure in her voice.

"I'm testing the floor," I answer.

She mutters something under her breath that sounds like *mas que vida*, which is a Portuguese expression Mama says a lot. I think it means--what a life. She doesn't sound happy when she says it.

"There's nothing wrong with that floor," Mama says. "You're just stalling."

The next afternoon, I follow Papa down the cellar stairs. He walks directly to the area under the pantry floor, and I notice him checking the ceiling.

"What are you looking at?" I ask, shifting my eyes.

"Your mother thinks the pantry floor is rotting," he says with disdain. "As if I don't have enough to do."

He points to a cobwebby corner where an old broom rests. "Bring that broom here a minute."

I hand it to him, and he uses the handle to tap the ceiling.

"Seems fine to me," he says, and hands me the broom to return. He cups his chin in his hand, and fixes me with a steady look. "I wonder where she comes up with these ideas?" His eyes crinkle, and I see a smile hovering on his lips. I make

up an excuse about Mama needing me, and scamper up the cellar stairs before he can ask any more questions.

Another school year goes by and I pass from fourth grade into fifth. It is the last day of school. My classmates and I race up the hill shouting and laughing with plans for summer fun. Three whole months with nothing to do but play, sleep late and read. Nancy and Shirley run home to get the jump rope, but when they call for me, Mama has other plans.

“Just a minute, young lady. Where do you think you’re going?” she asks, as I attempt to slip out the door.

“There’s a few things I need you to do before you go out to play,” she says, waving a list of chores in front of my face. I groan because I know the rule in our family--work before play. Summer vacation is no exception.

Topping today’s list is airing the bedrooms. Mary helps me drag the tired mattress to the porch, and lay it over the banister. With a wire-beater, I thrash out all those puffs of dust and winter germs then leave it to air in the sun. I feel better after pounding the mattress and confident that I have done a good job. When I ask Mama’s permission to go outside to play, she upsets me with her answer.

“Now that the girls’ mattress is airing I want you to do the same fine job on the boys’ mattress. We can’t let this good sunshine go to waste.”

I can hardly believe my ears.

“Aw, Mom,” I complain, “my friends won’t wait all day for me. They’ll find someone else.”

“Your sister can help you,” she answers. “Remember, many hands make light work.”

I don’t know why, but it irritates me when she says that. I squelch a retort and look for Mary. I find her in the bedroom, stripping the sheets and blankets with a look on her face that says, “If you can’t fight ’em, join ’em.”

“I’ll fill the washer and start the sheets, while you gather the blankets,” I offer. I drag the washer close to the sink and begin filling it. Mama comes in carrying a large pan of hot water, and pours it in the washer.

“Remember to add the bluing,” she reminds me. As I pour a capful into the water, I wonder how that ink-blue solution can stain my fingers blue, yet whiten the sheets. I start the agitator and drop the sheets in. There are no pillow cases because we don’t use pillows. Mama says it’s healthier that way.

When the sheets are ready, I tell Mary I'll hang them while she washes the blankets. I like hanging clothes because I can poke my head out the window and breathe in the fresh air. Papa rigged up two pulleys that feed lines on either side of the pantry window, across the backyard, and connect to a telephone post. I don't rush the line because it will come off the pulley, and it's not easy to get back on.

Behind me I hear the blankets swishing in the water. They're heavier than the sheets, and make the washer work hard. It pulsates like a boiling sausage about to burst its skin.

I finish hanging the sheets, and Mary says the blankets are nearly ready. She tries to hurry, and jams the thick blankets between the rubber rollers. We stop the wringer to unravel the twisted blankets then push them through again. The washing machine makes a terrible grinding noise.

Mama runs in and shouts, "Pay attention, and don't feed too much through those wringers. What's the big rush?"

Is she kidding?

Once the blankets are wrung out, Mary drains the gray water out of the washer and into the sink. I hook the blankets with three wooden clothespins, to balance the weight then advance the line. I don't want that blanket falling into the garden.

Changing the beds from winter blankets to summer linens is only one of Mama's planned chores. In late summer when the garden is full of vegetables, we're expected to help pickle baby onions and peppers, and can tomatoes. Mama's list is endless.

Somewhere between summer chores, time for play is squeezed in, like those blankets in the wringer. There are afternoons of jump rope, hop-scotch and playing jacks. As the days shorten, we play hide-and-go-seek in the shadows, calling out to one another in shrill voices, shivering with scary delight.

Like a rotting apple in the barrel, everything is spoiled when Mama calls out in a sing song voice, "Dol- ly ... Ma- ry ... time for supper." We come in, sweaty and boisterous.

"*Cabras!*" Mama says with disgust. "Look at yourselves. Go clean up before you eat."

What she doesn't realize is that Mary and I like being called tomboys. It makes us feel tough and rebellious. In fact I always feel bolder with Mary. Maybe that's why Mama separates us as we get older, sending us off on errands in different directions.

Now that I look back, I can see how wise Mama was to keep us busy and productive over the summer months. She discouraged the neighborhood children

from playing with us, because she didn't want us influenced by them. They weren't Portuguese, and their families didn't go to our church. She felt they had too much freedom, and they might undermine her authority.

Toward the end of that summer of 1947, when my sister Rita turned three, Mama had more pressing concerns. She had her hands full with Rita and Larry, only thirteen months apart, and was expecting another baby the end of August. There was also the added scare of polio. Parents were cautioned to keep their children away from large groups, and pools of stagnant water. When I looked longingly out the window after a rain shower, and begged to play with my friends splashing in the puddles, Mama said, "It's not safe out there. Play inside with your sisters."

I didn't understand, and chafed at the restrictions. I eagerly awaited the start of school, and the freedom of playing with friends at recess every day. Though I did have some worries about my fifth grade teacher, Miss Paquin. I hurriedly put that thought aside, and decided I'd better not be too quick about wishing away the days of summer.

Infantile Paralysis

Right from the start, fifth grade is the year that decides my future. It's as high as you go in the Longfellow School and that's the grade I'm in, though recess monitors keep wanting to steer me to the first grade line, because I'm small for my age. Maybe that's why I like to use big words, so that people know I'm not a little kid. But one of those words gets me into trouble the very first week of school. It happened this way.

My baby sister Rita looks like a china doll, and we spoil her by carrying her more than we should. She holds out her chubby arms with soft velvety folds and cries out, "Up, up." Even though she's just turned three and getting heavy, we give in to her sweet smile. Papa says we need to carry her less, and make her walk more. When she follows him down the cellar stairs, he holds her hand but doesn't carry her.

One day, towards the end of August, Rita tags along after Papa. I follow behind, ready to pick her up, but Papa shakes no with his head, and reaches for her hand. He steadies her on the stairs then settles her on the floor with wood scraps.

On one of his walks home from Firestone, Papa found a wagon for Junior to use on his paper route, but it had a broken wheel. Now he checks the wagon and says, "Dolly, bring me that box over in the corner." I place it on his workbench, and he searches through his spare parts. He whistles with delight, like a person who's found the missing piece to a puzzle, when he finds a similar wheel. Rita looks up from her play and laughs. She stacks the wood scraps into a tall pile then knocks them over, content with Papa nearby. When he finishes repairing the wagon, he puts it aside and tells Rita to follow him up the stairs.

"You carry me," she says.

"You're a big girl, too big for me to carry. Now give me your hand."

"I can't, Papa." She braces her hands on the floor and tries to push up, but her legs fold under her. Papa is not fooled.

"If you don't hold my hand and walk by yourself, I'm not letting you come down any more."

Rita makes one more attempt then cries out, "Papa, I can't get up." She drops her head into her lap and whimpers.

"Okay, but this is the last time."

Papa sweeps her limp body in his strong arms, and carries her up the cellar stairs. When he reaches the entryway, he puts Rita down for a minute while he latches the cellar door. She tries to get up, stumbles and plops in a heap. Papa

doesn't know what to make of this. He opens the door to the kitchen and calls, "Agnes, come here a minute. Something is wrong with Rita. She can't stand up or walk."

Mama finishes changing Larry's diaper then comes out to the kitchen.

"What do you mean, she can't walk?" she asks, brushing damp strands of hair off her tired looking face.

"Just what I said." Then Papa tells Mama what happened in the cellar. Mama tries to squat down but her large belly gets in the way. She holds out her arms and calls in a soft, cooing voice, "Rita, stand up and come to Mama." She wiggles her fingers to entice my sister. Rita lifts her head and tries to shift her legs. The effort makes her cry, and she rubs her eyes with her tiny fists.

"I'm going to call Doctor Costa," Mama says in a tight voice, and I begin to sense that something is very wrong.

Doctor Costa arrives at our house in a very short time. He must have left an office full of patients to get here so quickly. The thought makes me uneasy. Papa carries Rita to the bedroom, and we all gather around as Doctor Costa examines her. I hear him say a word I've never heard before--infantile paralysis. Mama clutches her hands together and makes a croaking sound. Papa gazes at Rita who lies still on the bed.

Doctor Costa's bushy eyebrows draw together in concentration. I sense by the look on his face that what he's thinking is not good. When he tells Mama that Rita will have to go to the hospital, I know this infantile paralysis is more serious than Rita being lazy. Part of me feels sad, but another part of me is excited. I can't wait for school to start so that I can use this new big word. Little do I know how my sister's illness will impact my life.

School begins a week after Doctor Costa's visit. George, who is sixteen, waits on the corner of Division Street, for the bus to Coyle-- the Catholic boys' school. The public school is closer but Mama doesn't like what she hears about the foul language at Durfee High School, and the careless way the students are allowed to dress.

Junior leaves shortly afterwards to walk the three blocks to Saint Louis School. He should be in the public middle school, but he's gotten into so much trouble there, Mama is hoping the nuns will straighten him out.

On the first day of school as I line up with the other fifth graders, the school monitor comes up to me and says, "Little girl, come with me to the first grade line.

This line is for fourth and fifth graders.” She is new and doesn’t know me. I tell her I am a fifth grader.

I’m in Miss Paquin’s class and she’s very strict. She has to be because she’s not only our teacher, but also the school principal. Papa says she’s small but mighty, which is what he says about my sister Mary, too.

Mary thinks she’s Superman. One day this summer she threw a towel around her shoulders, said it was her magic cape, and jumped out the pantry window into the back yard. It was amazing she didn’t break any bones. She said the curly hair on her arms makes her strong, and gives her special powers. When she talks like that, she gives Mama a headache.

This morning we have to get ready for school without Mama. She’s in the hospital with another baby. Margie was born on August 28th, and Mama will be away for ten days. She’s in the same hospital as my sister Rita, but not in the same room. I wonder if Mama has babies so she can rest. When she comes home, there will be eight of us.

Papa is in the kitchen fixing toast for breakfast, and I’m in charge of getting my sisters and myself ready for school. While rummaging around in the dresser drawer looking for something to wear, I spot my favorite red-checkered dress, with another one like it underneath. I get an idea ... the three of us should dress alike for school.

Pushing aside underwear, socks, shorts and other dresses, I find one that almost matches. It’s at the bottom of the clothes heap and very wrinkled. One of the ties around the waist is loose and ready to slip out of the seam. But the more I think about matching dresses, the more determined I am to make it work.

Before calling Mary and Teresa into the room, I lay out all three dresses on the bed, and hand press them. I choose the nicest one for myself and the next best one for Mary. She’s in third grade and I know she won’t wear the torn dress. I call my sisters into the bedroom and show them the three dresses. Right away, Mary complains.

“These dresses are all wrinkled. They need to be pressed.”

“There’s no time,” I say. “Just put them on and we’ll all match”.

“Sure,” Mary snaps, “easy for you to say. You have the best one. Let me wear your dress.”

“No, I’m the oldest and I get first choice.”

Teresa, who’s in first grade, and plumper than we are, stands by quietly. Her body is straight up and down and sturdy. If my sisters and I were parts of a

tree, Mary and I would be branches and Teresa would be the trunk. You can see that's a fact when she wriggles into the dress. She doesn't say a word, but I notice fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

"What's the matter?" I ask sheepishly.

"This dress has a hole in it and it's too small for me."

"I don't care. Put it on." Her tears make me feel bad, but I persist.

"We'll look like triplets," I coax. "Come on, it will be fun."

Papa pokes his head around the bedroom door.

"What's taking so long? You girls are going to be late for school."

Mary makes one last attempt. "Pa," she pleads, "Dolly says we have to wear these dresses that are wrinkled and have holes in them, just because they match and she wants us to look alike."

"While Mama is in the hospital, Dolly is in charge of your clothes. You listen to her and get dressed." And he leaves us to sort it out.

Teresa wipes her eyes with the backs of her hands, and struggles in her tight dress. Mary and I finish dressing, and I say in a falsely cheerful voice, "Now, don't we look like triplets?"

Mary is not taken in. "When Mama comes home I'm going to tell her you made us wear wrinkled dresses to school. Just you wait."

Teresa sniffles. She keeps pulling her dress down in hopes of making it longer. I can see it really is too small. Her pudgy body strains the seam at the waist, and the tie now hangs by threads. I think maybe this wasn't such a good idea, but it's too late to start over.

We finish breakfast and walk the short block to school together. Mary tries to press out the wrinkles with her hands. The three of us walk side by side, until we hear the first bell. Then we run. Once we reach the schoolyard, we go our separate ways. No one notices that we are all wearing matching dresses. Maybe at recess.

For weeks I've been holding that new word, infantile paralysis, in my head, and I'm bursting to use it. No one will mistake me for a first grader again. Our class is lined up outside the classroom in two straight lines, boys and girls. Miss Paquin steps into her office for a moment while we stand quiet and orderly, with no pushing or shoving. I tap the girl in front of me and whisper.

"My sister has infantile paralysis." She turns around and says, "What?" I repeat the word a little louder. Next thing I hear is the click-click of Miss Paquin's heels.

“What did I hear you say?” she asks, her beady eyes close to my face.

I don’t know whether to be scared, because I talked in line, or pleased because she must be impressed that I can pronounce this big word.

“My sister has infantile paralysis,” I say, repeating the word proudly. Miss Paquin yanks my arm and pulls me out of line. She points to her office and hisses, “Go in there and wait for me.”

Now I know I’m in trouble. I should have waited until recess to share my new word. Miss Paquin settles the class then returns to me. She stands in the doorway and talks about a quarantine.

“You march yourself right home, and don’t come back to school until the Board of Health gives you a note that says it’s safe. I don’t want you or your sisters in my school infecting the other children with those polio germs. Now go!” She gives me a push with the tips of her fingers, and I feel her nails through my thin dress. There’s something in her shaky voice that sounds like fear more than anger. It confuses me.

What can she be talking about, quarantine and polio germs? I am too young to connect the fear associated with the polio epidemic to her reaction. In my nine year old mind, this is just another childhood illness, like chicken-pox and measles. My sister Rita is ill, but there is no doubt she will get well. I think Miss Paquin is overreacting, but she’s the principal. When she speaks, no one contradicts her.

I was sorry I had ever mentioned the word infantile paralysis. I was going to be even sorrier when Papa saw me home in the middle of the morning. It sounded like Miss Paquin was going to pull Mary and Teresa out of school as well. With my head hanging in shame, I walked down the empty hallway and through the heavy outside doors. As I trudged up the hill, I wondered how I would ever explain why I had been sent home. If Mama were home she’d say I had a big mouth, and didn’t I know about keeping family business private? I was not having a good start to fifth grade.

Just Like Miss Harrington

Mama and Rita, who have been in different wings of the same hospital, return together, but without the new baby, Margie. Until the visiting nurse can report that we are all healthy, the baby isn't allowed in our home. She's staying with Mama's sister, Justine, who we call *Tia* Stina. Mama is so busy with Rita's care that I don't think she has time to miss the baby.

While in the hospital, Rita's leg was fitted with a metal brace and special shoes. Without the brace she drags her right leg, and her foot is starting to arch and contract. I know this from listening to Miss Harrington, the nurse. She visits once a week to check on Rita, and to teach Mama the exercises that will strengthen the leg muscles. She says the weak muscles have to be massaged with oil daily, and the foot stretched so it doesn't tighten up.

Each evening Mama sits in a kitchen chair facing Rita in an opposite chair, and gently massages and stretches. Sometimes Rita cries when Mama does the exercises, but Mama says it has to be done if she wants to walk again.

Meanwhile, Miss Harrington must have written a favorable report. The Health Department has decided that our family is not contagious, and we are allowed back to school. It also means our baby can come home.

The next day, my aunt arrives with Margie wrapped snugly in a pink blanket. She holds her close to her chest, breathing in her baby smell. Mama drags over a kitchen chair and sits down with her arms outstretched. Reluctantly, *Tia* hands the baby to Mama, who unwraps the blanket as if there are eggs inside. We crowd around Mama to see the baby. As the blanket falls away, Margie's sweet face pops up like a rose bud surrounded by petals.

"I guess I'll go now," *Tia* sighs. For the moment, we have forgotten she is in our kitchen. Mama stands with a firm hand on the baby, thanks her sister and walks her to the door. I glance at my aunt, and she gives me a weak smile.

"She's such a good baby, she hardly cries at all," she says to no one in particular. She remains by the open door, and reaches into her dress pocket for her handkerchief. "Remember, Agnes ... anytime." She shakes out her handkerchief, blows her nose, mumbles good-bye and quickly leaves.

We are happy to have Margie home, even though it means Mama is occupied day and night. Towards the end of October, Mama asks me to watch

while she does Rita's exercises. It doesn't surprise me when, a few weeks later, she has me take over. It means one more chore with less time for play, but evenings are cool outdoors, and my friends stay inside. Also, it makes me feel important to help, so I don't mind very much.

After supper dishes are done, I arrange the two kitchen chairs opposite one another, so that Rita's foot rests in my lap on a towel. Using a small amount of baby oil, like Mama showed me, I massage the calf muscle of her right leg. Then I gently rub some oil around her knee where the skin is chafed from the leather strap of her brace. The warmth from the nearby cook-stove, and the rhythm of the strokes, put us both in a relaxed mood. Once the muscles are warmed up, I begin the painful stretching exercises.

With her heel in my lap, I grasp her curling toes and press firmly upward. Rita's part is to press down against my hand in the opposite direction. My arms ache from the tension but I count slowly to ten before releasing her foot. When her lower lip begins to tremble, I devise a game, calling her toes the five piglets. On a variation of the Three-Pigs-and-the-Wolf story, Rita presses their house down, while I huff and puff. After ten seconds of pressing, she blows the house down, and I let my wrist fall limp. This makes her giggle, and encourages her to press harder. At the end of the twenty minute session, we are both relieved and tired.

It's a sunny afternoon in January when Miss Harrington makes a house call. On previous visits, she checked on the baby, but Miss Harrington says Margie is thriving and doesn't need her anymore. Now she shakes down the thermometer with a snap of her wrist then places it under Rita's tongue. While she waits, she folds over sheets of newspaper, and magically makes a sack appear. She removes the thermometer, wipes it down with alcohol and returns it to the black bag. The used cotton balls get tossed into the newspaper sack.

I sit and watch her brisk moves as she takes things out and puts them away. I see corked glass bottles of alcohol, mercurochrome and oils. Inside pockets hold cottonballs, tiny scissors, and gauze bandages, with a special slot for the thermometer. When her visit is over, she crumples the newspaper sack, and hands it to me to dispose of. She walks to the sink to wash her hands. After she wipes them, there's a pleasant odor of antiseptic soap and pure freshness. Everything about her is clean and orderly.

“Mrs. Silva,” she says confidently, as she adjusts the blue sailor’s cap on her wavy hair. “I see quite a bit of improvement here, and it’s been less than five months.”

I know what she means. Before, Rita could only drag her right leg. Now she can lift it, and step down with an almost normal walking gait.

“You are doing such a good job I won’t have to visit again for a month.”

Miss Harrington grasps the handle of her bag and gets ready to leave. She pauses and says, “I’m going to arrange for some physical therapy at the hospital. I’ll call you with the arrangements.”

Mama stands up and moves towards me. She rests her hand on my shoulder.

“I think we need to give Dolly some credit for Rita’s progress,” Mama says, surprising me. I lift my head to look at her then turn it aside to conceal my smile of pleasure. It wouldn’t do to appear too proud.

Miss Harrington steps closer to me. She reaches for my chin and tilts it up to face her. “Well ...,” she says. Reflected in her bright blue eyes is a look of approval that impacts the course of my life. In that moment, I know for certain that I am going to be just like Miss Harrington when I grow up. I imagine myself in her place, making home visits, and cleverly folding newspaper into throwaway sacks.

After she leaves, I slip back to the pantry where I have hidden the crumpled newspaper. I remove the cotton balls from the sack and carefully unfold it. If I’m to be a visiting nurse, I need to figure out how she makes that bag.

The Ghost and the Ironing Board

Miss Paquin has settled down, and doesn't try to avoid me anymore. No other children have been infected with polio and the school year is humming along. We're studying the Midwestern states and farming. George is a big help to me because he tells me what it's like when he picks beans in the summer months.

"I know I'll never be a farmer, that's for sure," he says with conviction. "It's a hard life and you eat a lot of dust," he tells me as I write my report.

That's why he's always studying, so he can win a scholarship to college. He wants to be a doctor. I'm going to be a nurse, but for now I'm just enjoying fifth grade, especially recess.

Our school playground is one large asphalt area with an imaginary line dividing the boys from the girls. For equipment we have one slide, chalky stones to mark hopscotch lines, and our imaginations.

My sister Teresa once embarrassed me on that slide. It happened last year when she was in kindergarten. She had an accident and wet her pants. Instead of asking the teacher to go home to change, she just took her pants off and hid them. At recess time, she flew down the slide as usual. All my friends came shrieking to me that my sister had no underpants. I yanked her off the slide, and couldn't leave the schoolyard fast enough. All the way home I chastised her for what she had done, but it didn't seem to bother her.

"It felt good going down the slide that way," she said innocently.

During recess we like to play jacks with a small rubber ball, or jump rope. Sometimes my friend Delores chases me around the school yard until we collapse in a heap of giggles. Recess is one of the best parts of the school day, along with music.

Just as it seems fifth grade is going along smoothly, I get another jolt. One day Delores tells Miss Paquin that her head aches, and is pounding. Miss Paquin keeps her in from recess, and lets her rest her head on her desk. The next day she's absent from school. She doesn't come for the rest of the week. I wonder what might be wrong.

On Monday morning of the following week, Miss Paquin stands in front of the class, and says she has something sad to tell us. She gets our immediate attention.

“Your friend and classmate, Delores, died this weekend. She had a tumor growing in her brain and it burst. Tell your parents we’ll be going as a class after school to pay our last respects.”

Miss Paquin’s voice shook as she gave us the news. There was a buzzing noise in my ears. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Some of us started to cry.

In 1947, it was customary in Fall River, Massachusetts, to have the body laid out in the parlor or front room of the family home. This is where our class went to say our last good-byes to our friend, Delores. We huddled together by the casket, and I remember noticing how dark her short hair looked against her pale skin and white dress. In that tiny coffin, she seemed surrounded by smothering crushed velvet. Delores’ big brown eyes were closed, but her feathery lashes made shadow lines on her snowy cheeks.

The waxy smell from a melting candle and the heavy perfume of flowers made me sick to my stomach. I said a few prayers then asked permission to leave. It was two blocks up the hill to my house, so I was allowed to go. My thoughts were heavy as I walked.

I struggled to understand how I could have been running and laughing with Delores such a short time ago, and now she was forever still. I thought only old people died, or soldiers in the war. How long did she have that tumor growing in her head? Was it like my leg aches that Mama said were growing pains?

I began to have terrible nightmares, where Delores and I would be chasing one another and then she would become still like a statue in the game of “freeze.” Images of her lying in her casket filled my head. Mama told me that Delores was in Heaven with God now, and suffered no more. But I wanted her here with me in school. I missed her giggles and her smiles.

When we returned to school the following week, nothing was different and everything was different. I didn’t have Delores to play with at recess, and in the classroom her seat stood empty. When Miss Paquin called the attendance she slowed down before Delores’ name. I knew my friend was absent not only today but forever. I felt empty and sad. What I didn’t realize was that I was also scared.

One evening, remembering the white casket, I feel uneasy. I toss and turn in the bed I share with my sisters, and Mary tells me to be still and to stop squirming. I must finally fall asleep because the next thing I know, I am stirred awake by rustling noises.

I look towards the window but don't see anything. I hear the swishing noise again, and turn my head to follow the sound. What I see makes me bolt upright. I stuff my fist into my mouth to stifle a scream. My heart races and pounds in my ears. Over by the closed bedroom door flutters a filmy white gown. I don't want the ghost to know I have seen her, so slowly and carefully I slide back under the sheet, and pull it over my face. Icy tingles chill my sweaty body. I begin to shiver.

Teresa never stirs. Mary, who is a light sleeper, rolls over and says, "What's the matter? Why are you shaking and hiding under the sheet?"

"I heard a noise," I whisper.

"What kind of noise?"

"A swishing noise, like a ghost," I say, and shudder.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," she says. She shakes my shoulder, and tells me to open my eyes.

Mary is eighteen months younger than I am, but much more practical, and definitely braver. When I refuse to open my eyes, she says with slightly veiled contempt, "Show me where you saw the ghost."

Still clutching the sheet, I point with my finger and whisper, "Look over by the door and you'll see."

I feel her turn. Then she says with some impatience, "Dolly, open your eyes and sit up. There's no ghost. What you saw was the ironing board leaning against the closet door."

I can't believe I would mistake an ironing board for a ghost. But Mary sounds very sure. I remove the sheet and slowly open my eyes. I see the ironing board with one of Papa's white shirts fluttering on top of it. The breeze from the open window fills the sleeves causing the shirt to appear as if floating in mid air.

My heartbeat slows down, but I feel foolish and embarrassed. I know Mary is right. Even so, I can't shake that ghostly spirit out of my mind. I was sure it was Delores come down from Heaven to visit, to remind me not to forget her. I want to tell Mary how much I miss my friend and how the ghost seemed so real, but I don't. I feel silly and childish.

And then Mary does something that surprises me. She pats my shoulder. With understanding in her voice she asks, "Were you dreaming about your friend Delores?"

"Not exactly dreaming," I answer. Her sympathetic voice and the darkness give me courage to go on. "When I heard the rustling, I thought it might be her spirit."

“Delores was your friend. She wouldn’t do anything to frighten you. She’s happy in Heaven, like Mama said. Now go back to sleep, Dolly. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Mary is about to slip under the covers when she turns back and says impishly, “And if I were you, I’d iron Papa’s shirts in the morning, then put that ironing board away.”

I nudge her with my elbow, and she chuckles quietly. As I slide under the covers, I am comforted by her tender explanation and gentle humor. It felt good to talk. Now I could believe Delores was happy in Heaven, and that I would be fine.

Mama Helps with Homework

For as long as I can remember, the dining room table has never been used for anything but doing homework. The nicked cherry wood stands in the parlor against the wall, flanked by two windows. Its only hint of glamour is the pink-shaded lamp with silky fringes. Many evenings, doing homework, I fan my fingers through that circle of silk. It has a soothing feel, like holding my hands under a faucet of warm water.

I run my restless fingers along the fringes now, and call out plaintively, “Mom, I need help with these words.” My spelling list is in front of me, and I am studying for the fifth grade spelling bee. The freshness of spring and the thwacking sound of a baseball bat drift through the open windows. Lamp light casts shadows on my words. I shut my eyes tight in concentration, and try to memorize the words. The last few on the list are especially difficult.

Mama is in the kitchen scraping the remains from the supper plates.

“Just a minute,” she answers.

In the pantry, just off the kitchen, my sixteen year old brother George is supposed to be washing dishes. Instead, he uses the wooden clothespins with the rounded heads to play an old war game. Mama hears him dropping them into the pan of cooling dishwater. He pretends they are fighter pilots peppering gunfire on the beaches of Normandy. The war has been over for nearly two years, but when the clothespins are handy and the dishes piled high, he gets sidetracked.

“George, stop playing and start washing,” Mama says as she adds more dishes to the stack on the counter.

Junior plays baseball in the street with his buddies. He’s eighteen months younger than George and somehow manages to avoid chores. Dusk is falling, and Mama looks out the kitchen window to check on him. Then she wipes her hands on a towel, and comes into the parlor.

“Let me see that word list,” she says briskly, reaching for it. “What words are giving you trouble?” I point out the last three: lieutenant, separate, and Wednesday. Mama pulls up a chair and sits solidly by my side.

“The secret is to break down the problem into manageable, smaller parts,” she says, sounding like a school teacher. “Forget the list and look at me.”

“Lie-u-tenant” she says, “is a tenant who lies. There’s a rat in separate. And your friend is wed on Wednesday.” Mama flips out her hands, palms up, and says with a smug look, “It’s as simple as that.”

Like a flash, these words become mini stories, and I have no more trouble visualizing them. Feeling confident, I put my study list away and pull the chain on the lamp. Mary sits on the carpeted floor nearby. She looks up with a cocky grin then continues playing dolls with Teresa and Rita. She feels pretty smug because when you're in the third grade, you don't have to worry about homework. I circle around my sisters and three year old Larry, who wanders between them, and move toward the piano.

As a piece of furniture, it isn't very impressive. The dark wood has scratches and some of the keys have parts of the ivory missing, but I love this upright piano. It is my hideaway during emotional storms, a friend when I feel lonely, relaxation after homework and pure pleasure when I finally master a song. With a half hour left before bedtime, I sit down to play. Baby Margie sleeps in her crib, so I choose a quiet song.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mama lean against the kitchen table and stand very still while I play. I once asked her if she wanted to take lessons from my teacher, but she said, "There's no time right now. My enjoyment is in listening to you play."

When I finish practicing, I look up, and Mama smiles at me. Her smile fills me with pride. She tugs her apron in place and moves with energy. She wipes down the formica table, folds in the leaves, sweeps underneath then moves the chairs in close. The easy chair in the corner stands empty because Papa is working second shift at Firestone.

Mama calls Junior in from play then checks on George's progress with the dishes.

"George, this water is cold," Mama scolds.

"I'm nearly done," George answers sheepishly.

"It's about time. Don't you have homework to do?"

"I'll finish up here and get right to it, mom."

It's lucky I finished my homework earlier because George will need the dining room table. I put my music away, gather my schoolbooks for morning and get ready for bed. As I brush my teeth, I run the spelling words through my mind like a mantra: a tenant who lies, a rat in separate, and wed on Wednesday. I remember Mama's stories and know those words are mine.

Weekends

Weekends have a rhythm of their own, starting with grocery shopping on Saturday mornings. Because we don't have a family car, Mary and I walk the two miles into town. We divide the list and shop separately: apples and oranges at River Market, Eight O'clock coffee at the A&P, paper products at Allen's Cut Rate, and canned goods wherever there is a sale.

Our shopping completed, we meet at Grants, where they sell broken cookies for ten cents a pound. This is a treat, and we know not to pinch even one morsel because Mama weighs them when we get home. Our greedy eyes follow the saleslady's hand as she reaches into the bin, and places a small mound on the scale. If we're lucky she'll give us an extra piece after she fills the sack. I hand her the dime and we leave the store, the bonus cookies popped in our mouths. Munching away, we share a smile of contentment as we start our journey home.

Juggling the groceries is always a challenge. Bags of heavy cans, bulging oranges, and cumbersome rolls of paper fill our arms. We shift and repack the bags, but it is a long walk with tired arms and stumbling feet. Occasionally a bag tears, and we chase oranges along Main Street. We laugh at our dilemma but make certain we find every orange. Mama exacts an accurate accounting.

It took only one incident for me to learn this lesson. On that particular day, Mama had sent me to the A&P for coffee. My friends were waiting for me to play, so I hurried to the store, paid for the coffee and didn't bother to count my change. When I arrived home, Mama checked my coins and found me a penny short.

"You march right back there while he still remembers you and tell him he shortchanged you a penny."

I couldn't believe my ears.

"And then you bring that penny home where it will do more good in my pocket than in his," Mama said firmly.

"But Ma, it's only a penny," I moaned, not wanting to face embarrassment.

"Only a penny," she repeated, mocking my words. "That's not the point."

Mama continued with her lesson. "He thought he could take advantage of you because of your age. When you go back and demand the correct change, to the penny, you'll show him he has another think coming."

She let that sink in for a moment. "And next time, count your change while you're still in the store."

I remembered Papa saying Mama was a good money manager. “She pinches a penny so tight it squeaks.” He always laughed when he said that as if it were a big joke. Now I understood what he meant and it didn’t seem so funny. With a backward glance at my friends, I trudged back to the A&P.

However, on this Saturday, Mary and I return from shopping with correct change and all produce accounted for. We have lunch then quickly do our chores. If Teresa has the little ones quietly entertained, we’ll be allowed to go outside for jump rope or hop scotch with our friends until suppertime.

Immediately after supper, we start our Saturday baths. Pans of water have been heating on the stove since early morning. The large tin tub, partially filled with cold water, rests on the kitchen floor alongside the stove. Mama pours in enough hot water until her dipped elbow tells her the temperature is just right. Then she says to me, “You know the routine. Start with the little ones, Rita and Larry, and make sure you check behind their ears, along the creases of their necks and the heels of their feet.”

Mama folds a towel over the open oven door and when the toddlers are clean, she wraps them in the warmed towel. She powders them and gets them in their pajamas while I get Teresa ready. Mama adds more hot water to the tub before Teresa gets in, and I supervise her bath because she’s only six. Then Mary and I have our turn.

The water is gray and cool, but Mama adds more hot water from the pots on the stove. We don’t pay attention to the color of the water because we all come out clean. When we finish, Mama directs Mary and me to the bedroom to get our clothes ready for church in the morning.

Mary and I squabble over underwear but eventually settle and organize our clothes. We drape them on a bedroom chair, and place our shoes and socks underneath. Mama says it is a sign of respect to look your best when you go to church.

While we are occupied, George and Junior hurriedly take their baths. Mama still checks their necks and the heels of their feet, especially Junior’s. He plays street baseball, and never notices how grit clings to his clothes and inside his shoes. I remember one Lenten season when Junior, an altar boy, was chosen to have his feet washed on Holy Thursday. He had to scrub extra hard to get his feet clean. I don’t know what worried him more, knowing the priest was going to wash his feet or finding a clean pair of socks with no holes in them.

Sunday morning we awaken and stumble into the kitchen, where Mama has our clothes warming by the stove.

“You still have sand in your eyes,” Mama admonishes me. “Go wash your face. And bring me the comb with a little water on it so I can freshen the part in your hair.”

Mary and I wear braids that are still tight from the day before. If we can find ribbons, Mama ties them around each pigtail. She tugs on the hems of our coats and straightens our hats. When she’s satisfied we are presentable, she places a nickel into our open hands, then closes our fingers into a fist.

“I don’t have to remind you to behave,” are her parting words as we start out for Santo Christo Church, about a mile away. St. Louis Church is closer, but Mama says it’s for the Irish, just as St. Anne’s, at the top of the hill, is for the French. We’re Portuguese and belong to Santo Christo.

“Why are you spitting?” Mary simpers, as we walk along the familiar streets.

“Because I’m receiving, and so are you,” I snap back. She makes me feel self-conscious, so I add bossily, “You’d better make sure your mouth doesn’t have any spit in it when you receive Communion.”

Mary swivels her eyes at me and says sweetly, “My spit is pure, not like yours.” And she runs ahead of me. I catch up and we arrive at church together, taking seats up front. Father Bettencourt says the Mass in Latin and the sermon in Portuguese. We don’t understand either language but at least up front, we can see what’s going on.

We like it when the choir sings, but once Father Bettencourt starts to speak, time drags. His voice is harsh and he always seems angry. When people come in late and try to sneak in quietly, he stops in the middle of his sermon and glares. He does the same thing if a baby cries. I think it’s his voice that scares the babies.

I squirm in the hard pew and accidentally bump Mary. She nudges me and I nudge her back. She drops her nickel, and slithers down to find it. Without warning, giggles bubble in my stomach. I press my lips together and clamp a hand over my mouth.

“I’m telling,” Mary hisses after she retrieves her nickel.

Just as I’m about to retort, I feel a gentle tap on my shoulder and look back. It’s one of the black-shawled ladies who sit behind us with their rosary beads and whispery voices. With an index finger to her lips and hooded eyes focused on the altar, she silences me. Feeling admonished, we sit up straight and quiet our dangling legs. We fold our hands in our laps, hoping we haven’t committed a venial sin. We pray silently until Communion.

We haven't had anything to eat or drink since last night's supper, and our mouths are dry. This poses a problem when the wafer is put on my tongue. It immediately sticks to the roof of my mouth like a magnet on metal. We're not allowed to reach in with our fingers, or touch the sacred host in any way. With my tongue in a twirling frenzy, the host is finally released and swallowed. I cast a sneaky glance at Mary to see how she is managing, and she sticks out her tongue. She's been successful as well.

Mass is finally over. We race home to breakfast and to baby-sit the toddlers so that Mama can leave for church. Somehow she seems a lot happier about going to church than we do. With her clothes laid out on her bed, she dresses quickly behind the closed door. She comes out, dabbing perfume behind her dangling earrings.

"Clear the way, everybody. Looks like I'm going to church with Miss MacWilliam," Papa jokes.

Mama gives him one of her looks that lets him know he's being silly, but she takes his arm and off they go.

The Healing Balm of Music

It's been four years since that dark day when Papa silenced the left-handed guitar on the top shelf of the closet. Yet gradually and without our noticing, Mama has found a way to bring music back into our lives. George is given a violin at the age of thirteen and quietly practices in the parlor. Through the glass-paneled door, I watch in fascination as he rubs resin on the bow, then turns the wooden pegs to tighten the strings. Next he tucks his violin under his chin. His posture is so commanding in front of the old music-stand that we ignore the squeaks, and hear only the music. Soon he is playing soft melodies that weave around our noisy activities.

Two years later, when Junior is thirteen and in need of motivation to study harder, he is bribed with an accordion. Not one to go unnoticed, he struts around the house inflating the pleated bellows until they can go no further, then squeezes them nearly closed. Junior's fingers press the buttons on the left and fly over the keyboard on the right. Unlike the violin, the accordion is a loud instrument.

"Listen to this," he brags while he plays and sings **Lady of Spain**. With the flair of a showman, Junior becomes proficient at entertaining all who will sit long enough to listen. When Mama reminds him that playing the accordion comes after his school work, he gives her one of his silky smiles and continues. His studies go by the wayside.

To add to this musical swirl, the summer of 1948 Mama decides I have been playing by ear long enough and am ready for structured piano lessons. It's as if we can't get enough music to fill the void left by Papa's mute guitar. Mrs. Mello comes to our house once a week and it is the highlight of my week. I strike the keys with such force, even the dust motes scamper out the open window. Like Junior, I mistake volume for skill.

"Place your hands this way and ease up on the pedals," Mrs. Mello tactfully suggests while positioning my untrained fingers. "It will sound better. Now try it again from the beginning."

I long for the day when I can play real music instead of practicing scales and boring exercises. Mrs. Mello assures me the day will come.

The piano was a surprise for my tenth birthday last year. I clearly remember the sight of it coming through the window on a mild October day. Both front and back doors were too narrow for the upright, so it was hoisted and brought in through the parlor window like a gift from the sky. I heard Papa say he got a good

deal because it was used. In spite of yellowed keys, nicks and scratches, it was a dream come true.

During my lesson now, I try to substitute an easy chord for the written music, but Mrs. Mello notices.

“It’s a gift to play by ear, my dear, but it’s not what you’re supposed to be playing,” she says. “Now let’s repeat that section again the way Mr. Schubert wrote it.”

There’s no fooling Mrs. Mello, even though she looks like she’s dozing when I do my scales.

Now that I need time to practice, family chores shift like a game of dominoes. Mama assigns dishes to Mary. In her haste to finish, Mary breaks a few.

Mama says, “Mary, from now on you wash and hang clothes. You won’t be able to break those.”

I’m still expected to help George with dishes, do Rita’s exercises nightly, and iron once a week. But I don’t help Mary with the laundry any more.

George and Junior used to share a paper route after school, but this is the second summer that George is picked up with other boys early in the morning to work in the bean fields. He returns at the end of the day covered in dust, sunburned and tired. Junior does the paper route alone, and he’s also responsible for shaking out the diapers. We all grumble and complain about too much work and no time for play, but Mama stifles us with her favorite saying about “idle hands and the devil’s workshop.” No one is idle in our family, but Junior comes mighty close.

One day while waiting for his papers to be dropped off, Junior is being reprimanded by Mama. She is unhappy about the mountain of diapers that have accumulated in the tub. Junior has procrastinated for days, and there is a formidable pile.

“I have a pot of water boiling on the stove, and I expect you to shake out and scrub every one of those diapers today.”

Mama stands with her hands on her hips and Junior knows she means business. I am practicing my lesson, so he approaches Mary.

“I’ll give you a penny to get those diapers ready for boiling before I get back from my paper route,” he offers.

“No way,” answers Mary. “I saw that stinking mess in the tub.”

“How about two pennies?” Junior suggests.

“If you did diapers every day like you’re supposed to, you wouldn’t have such a heap. I’ll only tackle that mess for three cents, not a penny less. And if Dolly helps me, it will cost you a nickel.”

“Agreed,” Junior responds quickly. He smiles a crooked smile and is about to leave.

“Not so fast,” Mary says holding out her hand. “Pay up first.”

Junior starts to complain then thinks better of it. With the paper route, he always has plenty loose change in his pocket, and he knows he has made a good deal.

“You drive a hard bargain, but ... okay,” he says grinning, and places five pennies in her hand.

After practicing my lesson, Mary and I set to work. We fill the tub with cold water, and swish the diapers back and forth, holding our noses with one hand to keep from gagging. We drain the tub several times then add fresh water and Ivory soap flakes. We scrub the diapers on the scrub board.

While we work, Mary and I discuss how we will spend our loot. We imagine it spent five different ways before we even have a chance to visit Pat’s candy store.

“Should we get taffy Kits?” I ask. They come in a package of four in three different flavors, chocolate, strawberry and banana. If you chew them slowly, they last a long time.

“How about the button candies?” Mary replies. They cover a long strip of paper in rows of pastel colors. Back and forth, we discuss the pros and cons of various candies while we work. By the time we are done, our knuckles are red and raw. After a final rinse, we bring the clean diapers to Mama.

She carefully drops them in the pot of boiling water, never questioning why we are doing the diapers. I think she is so thankful they are finally washed. After boiling and cooling, they are squeezed and carried to the pantry for Mary to hang out to dry.

When Mary finishes, we slip out to the candy store then bring our treats back to the porch steps. We sit quietly so as not to be discovered. If Mama sees us eating candy before dinner, she’ll take it away and say something about all that junk spoiling our appetite.

Lately, when I'm practicing, Papa comes into the parlor to show me how to play chords. He's begun to compose songs again, and uses my fingers for his missing ones. He hums the melody while I seek out the chords. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Mama standing still as a shadow by the kitchen table. I'm startled when Papa says with impatience in his voice,

"No, not that one, ... the A minor."

"I don't know what an A minor chord is," I confess. He moves my fingers, and I press the keys.

"Ah, exactly right," he says, smiling. "Let's try that once again." Papa sings his song and hums the part we are working on. I pay close attention, and when it's time for the A minor, I find it easily. Papa finishes humming, and tells me to continue my lesson. "I need to work some more on my song and you need to practice." With a bounce in his step, he goes in search of pencil and paper.

I hear Mama scuttle towards the pantry. My hands lift to my chest, and I feel my heart pounding. Papa is making music again. His renewed interest feels as fragile as a dandelion before the fluff blows away, and we all hold our breath.

That summer I awaken to the joy of making music. As I progress in my lessons and advance to beautiful pieces like **Moonlight Sonata**, I feel a personal accomplishment. Helping Papa find chords for his songs improves my ear for melody, but more importantly, connects us in a special way.

Mama's role is in the background. She ignores our protests regarding chores and practicing. Being children, we can't see beyond our immediate desires for playtime, and we resist. Because she understands the comfort and solace music brings, she is willing to make sacrifices for our benefit. She is the master of patience.

The first time I heard Mama play **Moonlight Sonata**, was over the telephone. I was in Minnesota and she in Massachusetts. Mama was in her eighties, and finally had the time and resources to take piano lessons. I pictured her at my old upright in the parlor. As her arthritic fingers played that gentle melody, my eyes clouded with tears of sadness, while joy welled in my heart. All those years, Mama patiently listened to and enjoyed our music. At last, it was her turn.

Childhood Deceptions

Throughout the school year we are expected to do chores during the lunch hour. At times, we hear the school bell and plead to be excused, but Mama accepts no excuses. It is no surprise that Mary and I are often late for school. Teachers reprimand us in front of the class and send notes home, but it makes no difference.

Once when Mary was in third grade, she was punished for her tardiness with a ruler whacked across her hands until they were red with welts. Another time she arrived after the children had filed in, and the heavy wooden door was closed. Mary was strong and wiry but no amount of tugging would open that door. She ran up the hill to tell Mama of her dilemma, but Mama sent her back, telling her to try harder.

After that, if Mary was late and had trouble with the door, she would sneak home and creep quietly down the cellar stairs. She'd hide in the room with the jars of canned vegetables until Teresa and I came home for lunch. The minute she heard us, she would run up the stairs and join us as if she had been at school all morning.

On one of these occasions, while hiding in the cellar, Mary was surprised by Papa coming downstairs to check how much oil was left in the drum. When she heard his footsteps, she cowered behind a wood-pile covered with cobwebs. She held her breath, fearful that Papa would discover and reprimand her. She felt shame for deceiving him.

Not until Mary was much older, would those feelings of guilt be eased, and she shared her story with me. It took place one afternoon, when Papa was in his eighties and recovering from his first stroke. Mary was sitting with Papa on the porch keeping him company. Mama was indoors, softly playing the piano.

"I remember you girls taking lessons on that same piano," Papa sighed. "After all these years, it's Mama's time."

The musical notes stirred up memories, and Mary began talking about our childhood years.

"Pa, did you know I used to hide in the cellar sometimes when you came down to check the oil drum?" she asked.

"What are you talking about? When did you hide, and why?"

Mary explained about being late for school and the heavy wooden door.

"You should have told me," Papa said. He reached for her hand. "I would have taken your hand like this, and helped you open that door." A pang of sadness blurred his pale blue eyes. He continued.

“You know, Mama always kept you children so busy. I think she wanted to spare me your noise and give me quiet time after work. Sometimes I would deliberately interrupt Dolly’s practice for the pleasure of singing my songs, while she discovered the chords. I didn’t get that chance with you. It makes me sad to think you didn’t feel you could come to me.”

He shifted in his chair to get his handkerchief out of his pants pocket. He wiped his eyes and put the handkerchief back.

“I know how heavy that school door was because I helped Dolly one time.”

Mary was astonished. “You mean Dolly hid in the cellar too?”

Papa smiled with the remembrance.

“Not quite as successfully as you did. On the day she was late she ran home and stood behind the door at the top of the cellar stairs, waiting for you girls to get home for lunch. I was going to feed the chickens before work. As soon as I opened the door I could see her little feet poking out. I looked behind and asked her why she wasn’t in school. She told me about being late and how she couldn’t open the heavy door.”

“Then what did you do?”

“Why I took her by the hand and we walked down the hill together. I opened the door, and she went into her classroom. She probably got yelled at and given another late slip,” Papa said chuckling at the memory.

“She never told me,” Mary said wistfully. “I always felt bad that I hid from you.” Papa gave her hand a squeeze. “You were just an innocent child, and that was a long time ago.”

With Mama at the piano keys, music wove its spell. Papa’s hand relaxed in Mary’s. Within moments his head drooped to his chest, and he started to doze. Mary sat peacefully listening to Mama’s music, never releasing the calloused fingers from her grasp.

Mama's Private Language

Mama had a language all her own. Though we sometimes pretended ignorance, for the most part we understood her. When she said "your drawer has nose troubles," we knew our clothes hadn't been tucked away neatly, and were sticking out from the dresser drawers. When she said, "throw the chairs and pick up the floors," we knew to move the chairs away from the table and sweep up the crumbs, and whatever else littered the floor. Even her cooking instructions were vivid. These were her directions for cooking a hard-boiled egg.

"You watch the water till it comes to a boil. Only when it's laughing do you start timing the eggs." We understood the tiny bubbles on the surface of the water were merely smiles, and the full boil was the laughter.

One day Miss Harrington, the Public Health Nurse, was making a well-baby visit. I parked myself right alongside her intriguing black bag, and settled in to listen. Mama, wanting privacy to ask her questions, told me to go pick up the floors. I knew Miss Harrington wouldn't understand Mama's strange language, and I looked up with a smirk on my face. Then I turned to Mama and pertly asked, "You want me to pick up the floors?" Before Mama could respond, Miss Harrington leaned towards me, held my chin in her soft hand, and fixed her vivid blue eyes on mine.

"You know what your mother means, don't you?" she asked in a gentle yet reproachful voice.

Feeling ashamed, I nodded yes, then slinked away to do as I had been told. Life proceeded smoothly, with Mama giving orders in her strange language, and we following them with innate understanding. That is, until the hot summer day when she told Mary to "throw the bottles of milk down the sink." Mary, who was nine, looked at Mama as if she couldn't have possibly heard correctly.

"Down the sink?" she asked with concern in her voice.

"Yes. Take those bottles down the cellar and throw them in the sink," responded Mama, beginning to lose her patience. Being eighteen months older than Mary, I knew exactly what Mama meant. The block of ice in the ice-box had melted, and the milk was going to sour if we didn't move it to a cool place. The sink in the cellar was the coolest place for milk until the iceman could make his rounds and bring us another chunk.

Mary repeated her question. "But Ma, do you really mean down the sink?"

Mama pressed her fingertips to her temples and squeezed her eyes shut tight. She was getting angry, thinking Mary was stalling.

“Just do as I say and let’s hear no more about it.”

Mary understood that tone of voice and quickly proceeded to carry the four quarts of milk down the cellar stairs. One by one, she emptied the bottles down the sink. When she poured out the last quart, she came upstairs looking for Mama.

She peered into the darkened bedroom and found her lying down with an alcohol-soaked rag tied around her head-- her headache rag. The room smelled like a sick room.

“Mama, do you have a headache?” Mary asked timidly from the doorway.

“Yes, now be quiet and do your chores. I was noticing your drawers have nose troubles.” Mary shifted from one foot to the other.

“But Mom, what should I do with the empty milk bottles?”

Mama lay absolutely still. Then her eyes flashed open and she bolted upright clutching her head. Mary inched back from the doorway.

“What do you mean, empty milk bottles?” Mama roared.

Mary flew through the kitchen and out to the yard, wailing all the way, “But Ma, you told me!”

Polio Camp

Once school let out for the summer, Mama's agenda and our plans were polar opposites. Where we looked forward to hours of idleness, Mama pictured projects getting done, and we were her work force. I was not looking forward to months of cleaning out stuffy neglected closets and other tasks that would keep me indoors. I was not looking forward to Mama's notion of vacation.

"How come I have to do everything?" I complained one evening as I stood by the window, watching Junior play baseball in the street. Rita patiently sat on a chair waiting for me to massage her leg. I dragged my eyes away from the playing children and plopped in the chair across from my little sister. Her smiling face tugged at me, but I continued to complain.

"How is it the girls do all the work and the boys get to play? It's not fair."

Mama got that mulish look on her face, where her lips fold in a straight pinched line and nearly disappear. I thought I had gone too far and held my breath. Then her face relaxed and she got that shrewd look.

"Dolly," she answered in a reasonable voice. "You're always saying you want to be a nurse like Miss Harrington. This is your opportunity to get some valuable experience, and help your sister at the same time."

She was right. But why didn't I feel better about her answer?

The following week Miss Harrington made her monthly visit, and had a pleasant surprise in store for me. She told Mama about the Polio Camp sponsored by the March of Dimes, and how she had arranged for Rita to attend for a week.

"It will be so much better for her in the country air away from the summer heat where polio germs thrive." Miss Harrington said.

"But Rita's barely three, and she's never been away from her family," Mama protested.

"I could arrange for Dolly to accompany her and continue with the exercises."

My ears perked right up. A week away from household chores. A week to play in the country. I didn't move a muscle, as they talked back and forth. Finally it was decided. I would be allowed to go.

The morning we were to leave, I was filled with a joy that bubbled up inside me like the fizz in soda. We were really going to spend a whole week playing in the fresh air. Rita and I waited for our ride at the bottom of the porch steps by the gate, my brothers and sisters surrounding us. In time, the station wagon pulled up to the curb, and the driver stepped out.

She was all suntanned legs and white teeth, as she smiled and introduced herself as Carolyn. Squeezing past us, she went inside to talk to Mama. After a few minutes she came out and called our names, beckoning us to follow her. I looked back at my brothers and sisters, now sitting on the porch steps, and waved to Mama, who stood in the window still as a post. Rita and I carried our small bags and quickly followed Carolyn. I was anxious to leave before Mama changed her mind.

The ride seemed to take forever. I must have been daydreaming because I was startled when Carolyn said, "We're here." Rita reached for my hand, and we stepped out of the station wagon.

I saw green fields, white clouds floating in a lazy blue sky, and off to the left, boats bobbing on sparkling water. Children at play shrieked like seagulls. Sunshine beamed everywhere. I felt like I had been dropped into Paradise.

"Come along and I'll show you where the younger children sleep," Carolyn said briskly. We quickly followed, Rita's small hand never leaving mine. Even so, she stumbled along on the uneven grassy slope in her special shoes with the thick hinged brace. I held her hand tightly to let her know I wouldn't let her fall. Carolyn brought us to a bunk house filled with small beds with side-rails.

"Your little sister will stay here," she said. "Now I'll show you where the older girls stay."

We followed her to a bunk house on the other side of the field, and she showed me to my lower bunk. Rita tugged on my hand. When I turned to see what she wanted, I noticed fat tears welling in her big brown eyes.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I want to stay here with you," she said.

"That's not possible," Carolyn replied pertly. "The little ones have to sleep on the safety cots with protected mattresses in case they have an accident. These bunks are for the older kids."

"But I don't wet my bed. I'm three," piped up Rita, bringing a smile to the camp counselor's lips.

"She's right; she doesn't wet her bed," I affirmed. "And we're supposed to be kept together," I said with new confidence. Carolyn softened, and seemed to reconsider. Then she said, "But we don't have an extra bed."

"She can sleep with me," I countered, standing as tall and firm as my four feet would stretch.

"These beds are narrow," she wavered. Rita and I didn't move. We knew we had won when she said, "Well, we'll try it but if she wets ..."

"She won't," I hastily interrupted.

So it was decided that Rita and I would share my bunk bed, which was just like sharing a bed with my sisters at home. Once that was settled, we put our belongings away and went out to explore the campgrounds.

It was a week of play and abandon. My only responsibility was my little sister, and we frolicked like puppies from morning to dusk. Daily massages and leg exercises became part of the fun when done outdoors. Exhilarated with sunshine and freedom, I flew to the swings, each day going higher and higher. Once Rita cried out, “Dolly, you’re going to fly off to Heaven. Come back.” Hearing the fear in her voice, I remembered why I was here and slowed down.

Meals were wonderful, with meat, mashed potatoes and gravy, and second helpings available. Buttered bread was sliced in fancy triangles and I wondered who took the time to slice all that bread. I quickly found out from my new friend Toni. She was the first black person I had ever met, yet our friendship felt as natural as bread and butter, which was what brought us together. She helped in the kitchen, and told me they needed more helpers. The job paid twenty-five cents a week, enough for a candy bar every day. I liked working with my new friend in the quiet afternoons, while the younger children napped.

Besides learning to slice bread in triangles, Toni taught me how to set tables and fold paper napkins. At home we ate in shifts and didn’t have the luxury of matching silverware and individual napkins. Being away from the chores of home made every activity seem like fun, even working in the kitchen. I made a friend and was learning new skills. I indulged in an abundance of new foods and a variety of activities, living every possible moment in the outdoors. Even the painful sunburn on my shoulders couldn’t spoil this week of fun and happiness.

At night, Rita and I snuggled in our bunk, and I read to her by flashlight under the sheet. When she finally dozed off, I lay there listening to her quiet breathing, and the rhythmic sounds of crickets. From the high window in our bunkhouse, I saw silvery stars in the dark sky. My body relaxed with a sigh that started in my toes, and spread so quickly that a dream was already floating under my eyelids.

The week soon came to an end, and it was time to board the station wagon to return to our city homes, and make room for a new group of children. While I stood in line, the camp counselor approached me, and whispered that I was wanted in the office. I was told something had come up and a child would not be coming as expected. For a minute I didn’t understand what that had to do with me, and I must have looked puzzled.

“That means your bunk is available,” Carolyn smiled. “Would you like to stay another week with your sister?” I answered with a resounding “yes”, not for a

moment considering my mother and family at home. I ran through the campgrounds straight to the swings with Rita following as best she could. I needed to swing high into the sky, higher than ever before. Rita stood nearby. Caught up in my delight, she jumped up and down clumsily on one strong leg and one withered one.

Our second week was even better. The camp routine felt familiar, and the kitchen job was still mine if I wanted it. I was praised by the staff, and heady with the importance of earning my own money. Each evening Rita and I walked to the camp store and selected the candy bar that we would share. My friend Toni was gone, but I enjoyed the ritual of buttering triangles of bread, and the symmetry of setting the table with napkin and fork on the left and knife and spoon on the right. I even started to fold the napkins in triangles, daydreaming that some day I would do this in my own home. I didn't ever want summer camp to end.

But, it did. As Rita and I lined up again by the station wagon that would take us home, unexpected tears stung my eyes. I looked with longing at the swings and the carefree children running at play. I took one last teary-eyed look around the open fields, the blue sky, the canoes on the water, the dining hall where I had my first job and taste of independence. I pretended not to notice Rita dancing around me chanting, "We're going home, we're going home."

I approached the camp counselor who gathered us up, and shamelessly asked, "Did everyone show up this week?"

She looked at me with a mixture of kindness and reproach in her soft eyes.

"You've been here two weeks," she said. "Don't you miss your brothers and sisters?"

The terrible truth was that I had hardly thought of them. I was preoccupied with my own pleasures, and thoughtless about the needs of my family. I pushed that uncomfortable thought aside as we boarded the station wagon for home.

In what seemed a very short time, we arrived. Carolyn opened the car door, and I mumbled a hasty good-bye. She must have called ahead because Mama and my sisters were all waiting in the yard. I walked with leaden feet. Rita broke away from me and skipped towards Mama.

"Who's that with you and where's Dolly?" I overheard Mama ask my little sister. Rita looked at Mama in puzzlement then giggled, as if Mama were making a joke. Two weeks of sunshine tanned me nearly as dark as my friend Toni. I had filled out from a skinny fifty pounds to a healthier sixty pounds. Mama didn't even recognize me. All those mashed potatoes, candy bars and buttered slices had plumped me into a stranger.

I put on a long face, and dragged my new body into the house. Mama looked us over with eagle eyes, and asked if we had had a good time. I answered a quiet “yes” then asked if I could go out to play.

“Play?” Mama asked perplexed. “Why, that’s what you’ve been doing for the past two weeks. I’ve been waiting for your return so that you can help me.”

Without missing a beat she added, “I want you to start cleaning out that closet in the parlor entry. We need to sort clothes to see what we can give to the poor.”

My first day home and Mama was sending me to that stuffy closet with the airless odor of winter clothes. I didn’t think kindly of Mama, not that day nor the next.

As the weeks passed and I fell into Mama’s routine, I remembered with fondness my two weeks at summer camp. I missed the carefree days, but while I was having a good time playing, Mary and Teresa were doing their chores and some of mine as well. I hadn’t thought of them once. I wasn’t proud of my selfishness, but there it was. It jumped out and surprised me like a garter snake in a pile of leaves.

Summer camp taught me many things, but I slowly realized there were many more lessons to be learned. Thanking Mama for allowing me to go to summer camp, would be a good place to start. I went inside to find her.

Miss Fitzler

The weeks after summer camp flew by and soon it was September. I started a new school, McDonough Junior High, as a sixth grader. My teacher was Miss Fitzler, the same teacher Papa had when he came to America, and began school at the age of eleven. That was in 1920.

I will be eleven in November, and I think Miss Fitzler must be very old. Papa says she's a dedicated teacher, but very strict. When I asked him to explain, he told me this story:

"One day in music class, Miss Fitzler had us sing a song, and I started to sing the harmony. I always liked harmony in music, but that wasn't what I was supposed to be singing. When Miss Fitzler asked, 'Who's singing the tenor voice?' I didn't say a word. I was afraid of her.

"She had us repeat the song while she walked up and down the aisles, snapping a ruler in her hand. When she passed by me, I moved my lips but didn't sing a note. She walked up to the front of the room, glared at us with her dark eyes and said, 'Everyone is going to get a whack if the person singing out of turn doesn't admit to it.' I had been in this country only three months, and still had a hard time understanding English. My only thought was to remain quiet.

"Afterwards, I felt sorry, because some of the girls got a whack too, and it wasn't fair. By the time she got to me the ruler broke, and I was crying and everyone in that room was crying. There was no more harmony after that."

After listening to Papa's story, I knew I would behave perfectly for Miss Fitzler.

There are now eight children in our family, and Mama keeps us busy, even during the school week. When we come home for lunch, she doesn't have to worry about squabbling or complaining. The minute we walk in the door, she is waiting with our assignments.

Mary's job is to hang clothes, and she wastes no time getting started. She is expected to fill both lines before she returns for the afternoon session. When she hears the school warning bell she speeds up, making the clothes line creak.

Being older, I'm sent on errands to the meat market or to the sewing lady, and I learn to be quick about it. Lunch is gobbled down then I run back to school, sometimes getting a stitch in my side.

It is three blocks to the junior high and one block for Mary and Teresa who are in grade school. Mary is in fourth grade and Teresa in second, but they rarely walk home together. Mary runs and Teresa dawdles. Her quiet manner pleases Mama, and she has less demands put upon her. Because of her gentle nature and soothing effect on the little ones, she is in charge of amusing the toddlers Rita and Larry, and baby Margie who is starting to walk.

Mama seldom has Mary and me do chores in the same area. She says we waste too much time in idle chitchat. One noontime, Mama sends Mary on an errand and assigns me the breakfast dishes.

"And remember to protect your school clothes," Mama reminds me. I grab an old floral housedress of Mama's that we use as an apron, and slip it over my school dress. The cooking stains are more vivid than the original floral pattern. About a foot of material is ripped from the bottom, and where sleeves once were, there are now gaping armholes.

On this particular day, I finish the dishes with only minutes to spare for a hasty lunch. Without thinking, I race back to school, forgetting that I'm still wearing the old dress as a cover. I remove my coat, hang it in my locker and worry about how I can slip into the classroom without being noticed. Fear nearly paralyzes me when I anticipate how angry Miss Fitzler will be when I am late once again. My mind wanders.

I think about the stories that circulate throughout the school, and some of my own experiences. Once when she kept me in for tardiness, I noticed her eating something white and creamy, which I later learned was yogurt. That was such a foreign food to me, and added to her strangeness.

I remember Papa's stories of how she would crack a ruler over your knuckles or on your head, and I had seen her do that to a few disruptive boys. One time the boy sitting across from me quickly slid his hand off his desk just as the ruler crashed down. The snap made me shudder, and clasp my hands to my chest. I slid down in my seat trying to become invisible. I watched in fear as Miss Fitzler circled her long fingers around the ruler like a coiled serpent, while she ordered the boy to put both hands back on his desk. That time she didn't miss.

Now Miss Fitzler sits behind her desk. I hesitate in the doorway. Her thin body is like a crisp stalk of celery, all stringy fibers. Her dark hair pulls away from a pinched face that is never softened with a smile.

Gathering my courage, I enter the room. The minute I cross the threshold, the students start tittering. Instantly, I remember the old dress. Miss Fitzler looks up from her desk, gives me a withering look, blinks her piercing eyes then gives me a second look. I feel shame creep up my neck and flush my cheeks. I dash to my locker, remove the offensive dress, and for one foolish moment contemplate going home. I know that's useless as Mama will send me back. When I drag myself into the classroom, all heads are bowed over workbooks. Miss Fitzler is in complete control of the class, and I reach my desk without further embarrassment.

On that day, when she swiftly stifled the jeering students, I looked at her with clearer eyes. She didn't even mention my tardiness. I felt she understood my fear of being different. My anxiety changed to respect, and I thought I might begin to like her.

Starching Curtains

It is my last day of sixth grade and I look forward to summer vacation. I don't race home from school with wild abandon because I'm almost twelve, but the thought of leaving that musty building for the sunny outdoors exhilarates me. I'm an emerging caterpillar about to become a butterfly.

My friends, Claudette and Marie and I, walk arm in arm, excitedly making plans for the carefree days ahead. When we reach my house I see Papa taking down the storm windows from the parlor, and I cry out, "Oh, no."

"What's the matter?" they chorus with concern in their voices.

"My father is taking down the storms and putting up the screens," I moan, remembering a conversation Mama and I'd had a few weeks ago.

Claudette asks, "Are you worried your father will drop one of the windows with his hook?"

I look at her with bewilderment. "Drop one. Why should he?" I ask. "He uses that hook like his own hand."

My answer comes quickly but her question takes me aback. It's been four years since the Firestone accident and the only time I think of it is when I come across the fake hand, laying on a dresser or hanging on the back of a door. Its vinyl veins and bloodless color are vivid reminders of the missing hand. But the hook is like a tool. With it, Papa tackles everything.

Now Papa hands a window to Junior, who carries it down to the cellar. With Junior's help, the windows will be done in no time and ready for washing. I groan.

Marie gives my arm a shake. "Well, if you're not worried about your father dropping the windows, what's the problem?"

"You have no idea," I mumble.

"Well, see you tomorrow," they happily chirp and continue down Division Street in blissful ignorance.

My worst fears are confirmed the minute I open the door and walk into the kitchen. Mama greets me with the blue box of Niagara starch in her hands, and a big smile on her face.

"Remember what we talked about a few weeks ago?" she asks innocently. Replacing the heavy winter drapes with white lace curtains is a rite of summer as timeless and predictable as the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. I nod my head.

"Go change your school clothes. This is the summer you learn how to starch curtains."

You'd think she was giving me a prize. As soon as I'm ready, she motions me to follow her as she gathers supplies.

"You're always complaining you don't get outdoors enough. This is something you can do outside in the fresh air."

Her words sound sincere but I feel as if she's pulled a fast one on me.

Mama is all briskness as she fills a pail with tap water and hands it to me to carry out to the porch. She shakes in enough starch to make a syrupy mixture then dips in the first curtain. When she squeezes out the milky solution, it coats her fingers making them look like breakfast sausages.

"Watch how I do this," she says, carefully shaking out the curtain. She pins it to the top row of porcupine pins that edge the wooden frame. As she pokes the lace curtain, she also tugs carefully so that it stretches. When she reaches down the side to the lower section of the frame, she says, "Now you try it."

It looks easy, and in my haste, I soon learn the tiny pins are deceptively sharp. I pull my hand away and suck on my finger.

"Careful," Mama cautions. "You don't want to get blood on the curtains or we'll have to start all over again." That thought is enough to guide my fingers carefully over the spiked pins.

Mama leaves me starching and pinning curtains, and goes indoors to take down the rest of the winter drapes. She shakes out the dust, and folds them carefully between sheets. She carries them to the attic where they will remain until fall, when we reverse the process.

After the lace curtains are stretched on both frames, I leave them to dry and stiffen in a sunny spot in the yard. Now I can play with my friends, I think. But Mama has a different idea.

"Let's go inside and find Mary," she says, brushing dust from her hands. "You and Mary can wash where Papa has removed the storm windows. When the curtains are dry, the windows will be cleaned and ready."

Mary overhears us and hides in the bathroom. Mama is not fooled.

"Take this pail and empty it down the toilet," she says with a knowing grin. "I'll get some vinegar to add to the fresh water."

"Boy, you can't get any peace around here, even when you're in the bathroom," Mary complains loud enough for Mama to hear. She silently lifts the hamper to hide the Archie comic book she's been reading.

I pour the starchy water down the toilet and tell Mary she's to help me with the windows.

"I know," she says with disgust in her voice. "Summer vacation. Ha."

“Here are some soft rags that will help you get those windows sparkling,” Mama says, ignoring Mary’s remark.

There are two windows in the kitchen, three in the parlor, one in the pantry and one in each of the two bedrooms. We start in the parlor.

While Mary and I clean windows, Mama checks the curtains. In the bright sun, it doesn’t take long for them to dry. She unpins and lays them on the kitchen table where she creases sharp folds with her hands. As Mary and I complete a window, Mama follows hanging the freshly starched curtains.

Seeing those pure white curtains on the sparkling windows gives me a good feeling. A soft breeze flutters through the lace carrying in the fresh scent of starch. Sunlight bounces off the windows in all directions accentuating the shabby area rug on the floor.

When the carpet was new, the pattern of green ivy circling around wine-colored cabbage roses was a perfect match for the maroon winter drapes. With a fire in the coal-stove, the parlor was a cozy room. Now those roses have worn away with the traffic of many feet. Even though Mama rotates the rug every year, the threadbare roses look more like blotches of spilled coffee.

That evening, Mama comes into the parlor to say goodnight. Teresa is already asleep in the middle of the bed. Mary and I have been whispering about the rug, and wonder what our chances are that Mama won’t notice.

“You girls did a good job today,” Mama says softly. “Everything smells fresh and clean.”

She comes close to my side of the bed and smiles. “Everything that is, except for the rug,” she whispers.

I groan. “Ma, that rug is so threadbare it’ll fall apart when I beat it.”

“All the more reason to be gentle,” she counters.

“Tomorrow I’ll help you roll it up and carry it out to the porch. When you’re done, we’ll put it away in the attic until winter. Better get your rest now.”

Mary rolls over on her side of the bed, and I know she is chuckling by the shaking of her shoulders. I bet she’s thinking she managed to slip out of that job.

Later in the week, as Papa removes the rest of the storm windows, Mama and I repeat the process of dipping curtains in starch and pinning them on the wooden frame. Mary and I wash the remaining windows. Afterwards, the house sparkles, and a little part of me feels proud. The house is magically transformed from winter into summer, and I helped make it happen.

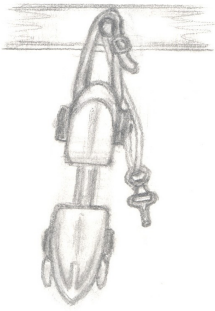
Skating Lessons

Squeals of laughter glide up and down the hill as my sister Mary roller-skates with neighborhood friends. I sit on the porch steps, impatiently awaiting my turn. Mary ignores my flailing hand signals and flies past, grinning from ear to ear.

“Ma, Mary won’t share the skates with me,” I complain as I stomp into the kitchen.

Mama, who’s ironing, slaps the iron down on the metal rest, and gives me an irritated look.

“If you girls can’t work it out, I’m going to give those skates away.” She marches to the screened window and calls out, “Mary, you come inside this minute and give those skates to your sister.” Then she returns to her stack of ironing.



Mary stops suddenly, unclasps the skates from her shoes with the metal key, and clomps up the porch steps. She opens the kitchen door and strides inside, holding the skates in her hands. She hands one skate to me and gives me an exasperated look, letting me know I haven’t heard the last from her. I smirk and put out my hand for the other skate.

“Not so fast,” she says. “Go sit on the porch steps and I’ll give the other one to you when you’re ready.”

Even though I’m older than Mary and should know better, I go along with her bossiness. I clip the skate onto my shoe and tighten it with the key.

“I’m ready,” I call through the open window.

Mary slides the window screen aside, pokes her head out and says, “You want this skate? Here, you can have it.” She drops it very deliberately on my head, changing a perfect summer day into a nightmare.

I’m stunned by a hard clunk. I touch my head and feel a warm stickiness like pancake syrup. When I pull my hand away, my fingers are covered with blood. The sight frightens me and I wail ... “Ma-a-a-a.” Somehow, I unclip my skate and stagger into the house.

“Oh my God,” Mama cries out while holding the hot iron on a shirt, nearly scorching it. “What happened to you?”

She yanks the cord from the wall, rests the iron then rushes to me for a closer look.

“Mary dropped the skate on my head,” I whimper.

Mama quickly grabs a kitchen towel, wrings it out in cold water and presses it firmly against my scalp. The steamy smell of the iron and the rising panic in my stomach make me feel sick. It helps that Mama is all common sense and doesn't seem to think I'm going to die. In a voice tight with anger, she instructs Mary to watch the younger children.

"We're going to see Dr. Costa," she says. "We'll talk about those skates when I get back."

Mama presses the towel on my head, and I huddle close as we hastily leave the house. Neighbors in their yards glance up with questioning looks, but Mama doesn't stop to chat. We are a tottering pair as we walk the five, long blocks to Dr. Costa's office.

Last summer, when Mama had a medical problem, I accompanied her to his office. No bright receptionist ushered you in or offered you magazines while you waited. Sick old people sat on mismatched chairs, and waited patiently in his inner office. Weariness and fatigue mixed with antiseptic smells gave the waiting room the air of a confessional. When the doctor's bushy mustache and booming voice hailed you to his inner office, I wondered if the rumors that Dr. Costa was hard of hearing were true. Yet, as each person emerged from his office, clutching prescriptions in their hands, they seemed to walk taller and more confidently.

Now, as we arrive at his office, we sit down and wait our turn. I think the bleeding has stopped but my head throbs and I'm glad to be sitting. A woman, my mother's age, comes out of the treatment room. She holds the hand of her young child, and with her other hand, blesses Dr. Costa with her thanks. He seems embarrassed by her praise, and gently moves her towards the door. As he's about to bellow in the next patient, he takes one look at me and gestures for us to follow him. The other patients are too polite to complain.

"Sit down," he says, directing me to a hard-backed chair. Mama stands close by, careful not to bump into a metal cabinet with bulging drawers. Dr. Costa carefully removes the blood-soaked towel and hands it to her. She looks for a place to lay it on the counter, but decides against disturbing the chaos of bottles and vials, and folds it in her hand.

"Well, well, what have we here?" he asks in a gruff but friendly voice.

"My sister dropped a skate on my head," I answer timidly.

Dr. Costa makes a clicking sound with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. While he checks the pupils of my eyes, I notice tufts of black hair sprouting from his ears. I wonder if that's part of his hearing problem.

"I've heard everything now," he says, shaking his head. He presses my scalp gently and snips away some matted hair.

"How old are you Dolly?"

"I'm almost twelve," I say in a trembling voice, not liking the sound of the scissors.

"Well, you're going to need a few stitches, so I'm glad you're old enough to be brave. What I'm going to do may smart a little."

Mama, who's been standing in the corner, moves in closer. Dr. Costa clears his throat and says, "You have a brave girl here, Mrs. Silva. Why don't you go to the waiting-room. This shouldn't take long."

I try to look courageous as I glance at Mama. She moves toward the doorway, and I nod my head that it's okay for her to leave.

"I hear you want to be a nurse," Dr. Costa says while washing his hands at the sink.

His interest takes me completely by surprise, and gains my rapt attention. With his back to me, he reaches for instruments which have been soaking in a solution, and lays them on a clean towel.

"You seem surprised that I know," he chuckles under his breath. I am speechless.

"I wouldn't recommend any more fights with your sister, but now that you're here you may as well learn what goes on in a doctor's office. Then you can decide if you still want to become a nurse."

From a tall glass jar he pinches a handful of cotton balls, and soaks them with the same bright orange Mercurochrome Mama uses on our scrapes and cuts. He opens a drawer for a small packet of black thread--which he tells me is called catgut--and threads a curved needle. His hands move swiftly and seem to know where everything is amidst all the clutter.

I don't remember much after that or even how many stitches I had. He may have given me a whiff of ether, or maybe the vapors from all those amber glass vials made me woozy. Somehow his droning voice soothed me, and I wasn't afraid.

When Dr. Costa finished, he dropped the soiled instruments into the sink to soak. He showed me his sterilizer, then washed and set the instruments inside to process. After washing his hands, he checked over his handiwork, and asked me how I was feeling. "Fine," I said in a faint voice that didn't sound like me.

“Good. Now go home and don’t make any more trouble for your worn-out mother.” His voice was gruff, but his hand on my shoulder was gentle as he guided me to the waiting room. Mama stood up immediately and came to my side. Dr. Costa instructed her about returning to have the sutures removed. “That’s the fancy word we use for stitches in the medical profession,” he said, looking at me. “And remember, if you have any more questions about nursing, you come and talk to me. You’re going to make a fine nurse.”

Going out the door I hear him bellow, “N-e-x-t?”

“What was that all about?” Mama asked as soon as we got outside.

“He knows all about me wanting to be a nurse like Miss Harrington. How does he know?”

“Oh that. Well, I may have mentioned you doing the polio exercises, and your interest every time Miss Harrington makes a visit. But I don’t want you bothering Dr. Costa. He’s a very busy man.”

Now that the excitement of the visit was over and Mama saw that I was going to be okay, she was back to being angry. I could tell by her tone of voice.

When we got home Mama asked Mary to bring the skates to her. She took them from Mary, and walked out the kitchen door without saying a word. We watched her from the window, and wondered where she going with them. She crossed the street and headed directly for the sewer, where she dropped them into the murky waters below. Mary gasped, and I held my breath. When Mama returned empty handed, we said not a word.



Whistle a Happy Tune

Ever since the afternoon of the roller-skating incident, Mary and I seem to irritate one another if given half a chance. And when it's hot and sticky, and the babies are cranky with heat rash, just being in the same room feels too close for comfort. One afternoon, Mama surprises me with a pleasant change in routine.

"Dolly, that was your *Tia* Maria," she says, placing the telephone back on the cradle. "She has some bread for me and I'd like you to pick it up. And remember to change your shorts before you go," Mama adds as an afterthought.

That's when I remember how strict my aunt is. My sisters and I are a little subdued by her stern manner, though she's always kind to us. She dresses in somber, old-fashioned clothes, and is particular about ours when we visit her. Wisps of her graying hair escape a thick braid wound tightly around her head like a crown, or sometimes pulled back into a bun. Knowing she sits in a pew behind us in church is enough to straighten our backs and stifle our giggles.

Tia Maria, as we respectfully address her, speaks only Portuguese, though she allows me to answer in English. She expects me to wear a dress even on hot days. It annoys me that I have to change out of my shorts, but then I think about the refreshing orange soda *Tia* always has in her refrigerator, and I slip into a sleeveless dress.

I like going on errands and don't mind it when Mama sends me to *Tia*'s house to pick up day-old bread or hand-me-down clothes from her neighbor across the hall. Walking the one mile from our house to *Tia*'s house, I leave all the cares of watching babies behind, and think only about how nice it is to be outdoors swinging my arms, enjoying the breeze. It's not the same coolness you feel when you roller skate down a hill, but more a feathery touch that soothes me. If I'm honest with myself, I'm cooler wearing a dress than the shorts. I decide this isn't so bad, and whistle a happy tune.

At forty-six, *Tia* Maria is Mama's oldest living sister. She never married, and doesn't appear unhappy in her life alone. Her apartment on the second floor is spotless. As she answers my tentative knock on her door, I follow the sweep of her eyes for approval. Her face relaxes in a smile and I know, this time, I am properly dressed. I follow her into her quiet home where the only sound is the ticking of the hall clock, steady as my heartbeat after climbing the stairs.

The linoleum kitchen floor gleams with wax polish. The checkerboard pattern of green and yellow squares reminds me of George's promise to teach me to play checkers later this summer. A portly tan and mint green oil-stove with bright

chrome knobs and handles, dominates the room. In winter, it heats the house just like our black one. On this summer afternoon, the unused stove is draped with a fringed shawl in shades of blue, yellow and red. It is the same vibrant red of the bleeding heart of Jesus icon nailed to the wall.

On top of the shawl are pictures of old people with somber faces. *Tia* Maria notices me staring at them, and tells me they are my relatives from the Azores where she was born. When I stand there mutely, she realizes I don't recognize any of them. She walks to the shawl and picks up one of the pictures. Then she tells me to sit at the table, and places the picture in front of me.

"I want you to take a good look while I get you some orange soda. You must be thirsty after your walk."

I sit primly in the wooden kitchen chair, and wait. After a few minutes, *Tia* carries in two glasses of soda and asks me to hold them. Her table is covered with a freshly starched white tablecloth, trimmed with lace, and I know I must be careful. She folds back a corner of the tablecloth and places two napkins where I set down the drinks. *Tia* pulls up a chair across from me, and lowers her compact body into it.

"This is your grandmother and your grandfather," she says, pointing to two old people in the black and white photo. I am eleven years old, and it's the first time I'm hearing about them.

"Did they ever see me?" I ask with interest.

"When you were a little baby, your grandmother held you in her arms and rocked you to sleep."

It feels good knowing I had a grandmother who loved me. I examine her face more carefully.

"How come I don't remember her?" I ask.

She explains that I was just a few months old when my grandmother died, and my grandfather had died years before. In the picture they both look stern, very much like *Tia*, but now I feel closer to them. After showing me the photo, she places it back on the shawl, trailing the fabric delicately with her fingertips.

"This shawl comes from my home in the old country," she remarks, and her face softens for a moment. Then she shakes her head as if to clear away the memories and asks, "Would you like more soda?"

"*Nao mais, Tia,*" I answer. She smiles. *Tia* always likes it when I attempt a response in Portuguese.

Now that we have finished our soda, it's time for conversation about the family, with *Tia* asking questions in Portuguese and me answering in English:

"How is your mother?"

“Fine.”

“Are you helping Mama with the children?”

“Yes, *Tia*.” This answer brings a satisfied look to her face and she nods.

“Do you remember what I said about whistling and not wearing pants?”

“Yes, *Tia*.” I begin to squirm, anticipating a sermon.

“A young lady never whistles and never wears pants, not even in summer.”

She refers to the one time I visited her wearing shorts, and whistled as I climbed the stairs. She called me a *cabra*-- a tomboy-- and sent me home to change. Two things *Tia* would not allow me to do, wear shorts and whistle. I solved the whistling dilemma by silencing it before I approached her house, and I knew better than to wear shorts again.

Our conversation is interrupted by a knock on the door, and a woman's voice identifying herself. *Tia* opens the door just enough to accept some bags from her neighbor, and they exchange a few words. The neighbor looks over *Tia*'s shoulder, smiles at me then leaves. I recognize her as the Bread Lady, which is what my sisters and I have named her. *Tia* closes the door, places the bags on the pantry counter, and glances inside.

I take this opportunity to rinse my glass and place it on the drain mat in the pantry. This snug room off the kitchen is only big enough for the small gas stove, refrigerator, sink and counter. The cupboards above have glass panels and I see pretty dishes and tall pink glasses. On the floor in front of the sink is a colorful rag rug probably made by *Tia*. A basket with scraps of similar fabric rests nearby. *Tia* Maria dresses in plain clothes, but her house is warm with color.

Now that our chat is over, it's time for our usual tour of the house. *Tia* is proud of her home, and knows I enjoy seeing her beautiful things. The door to the guest bedroom is open, and I see the polished wood of the dresser covered with an embroidered white scarf. There are pictures on the dresser along with dried green palms from Palm Sunday tucked in the side of the mirror. On the wall above the brass bed is a crucifix. The stark figure seems to gaze down benevolently on the golden bed with the white bedspread. Lacy curtains ripple in the breeze. I want to lie on that bed and pretend this room is mine.

Tia's bedroom is next. I glimpse a small statue of the Blessed Virgin on the dresser with a dark red votive candle in front of it. The candle is unlit now, but it must have been lit earlier because I catch a faint whiff of soft wax as I stand outside the room. Window shades in both rooms are drawn halfway, making the house feel cool and restful.

We move on to the fanciest room of all, the parlor. It has a stiff sofa that looks uncomfortable to sit on, and I'm not invited to. The best part of this room is that it opens out to a small balcony that overlooks the street. Now that it is summer, *Tia* invites me to sit with her and watch all the activity below. Shoppers, returning from the grocery store, hold bulging bags close to their chests. Some children roller-skate and others chant rhymes while jumping rope. It's like having front row seats in a theatre, watching everyday life unfold. I never want to leave this place, and I think *Tia* must understand.

Eventually, *Tia* rises stiffly from her chair, tugs at her dress which sticks to the backs of her legs, and exclaims as if she just now remembered the reason for my visit. I follow her through the parlor, careful not to touch anything, and we return to the kitchen.

While I wait, *Tia* removes the contents of the bags to the counter, putting aside some sweet rolls and cookies for herself. She is about to remove a donut but looks at me, and changes her mind. She puts the donut back, and in that split second I have an idea. Even though I'm not supposed to, I know I'll be eating it on the walk home.

The rule is to bring the bags home complete and untouched. Mama uses the day-old bread for soaking in soup or for making thick French toast sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. It isn't often there are sweets mixed in, and I take a chance the donut won't be missed.

As *Tia* helps me shift the bags into a comfortable position in my skinny arms, she notices the bristles by the scar on my head, and tenderly brushes her hand over it. She shakes her head but doesn't mention the skating incident. Instead, she opens the door and cautions me to walk carefully down the stairs.

When I reach the sidewalk, I look up at her balcony to see her wave one last time. At five feet two inches she is not tall, but her bearing is formidable. I smile back and wonder why she returned the donut to the bag. Could she have read my thoughts? Was she telling me it was okay? As soon as I round the corner and know I can't be seen, I rest the bags on the street and dig out the donut. It doesn't last long, and I lick every sugar crystal from my fingers. Then I moisten my lips and whistle all the way home.

Discipline

The skate incident set the tone for the rest of the summer. If we felt overworked before, we had a lot to learn. Mary and I never seemed to grasp the idea that it didn't matter how quickly we completed our tasks, Mama always found another one. In some ways, it brought Mary and me closer. Mama became the enemy and we the defiant front.

"Ma," we would dramatize, "we did everything you asked us to do. Now can we go out to play?"

"Later," she would answer--a maddening response that meant nothing.

We energetically scrubbed floors, laundered clothes and cleaned closets, always hoping. There was a futility to finishing chores quickly, yet we rushed through them, anticipating today would be different. It seemed Mama's strategy was to keep us so busy there was little time for mischief.

Open windows were our natural air-conditioning as well as our connection to the outside world. Through them we could hear our friends, Nancy and Shirley, approach our fenced yard calling our names. Mama would ignore their singsong cries and mutter with distaste, "Wolves at the door. Why do you want to go outside when you have your sisters to play with?"

Both Nancy and Shirley were only children and counted on us as their playmates for one-two-three red light or jump rope. Once when I was complaining about all the chores in a large family, Nancy said, "But you're so lucky to have a big family. You're never bored because you have one another." She was right, but I never thought of it that way. I just saw the endless work and the responsibilities of caring for my younger sisters and brother.

We felt resentment and hostility, but it was never voiced. Instead we taunted Teresa, who cried easily. Or we ran outside, abandoning the younger children. The punishment for leaving the children unsupervised was a stropping of the legs. Some days, the temporary freedom seemed worth it.

When Mama would call for us in a sweet voice, it disarmed us. We came indoors expecting a treat. Instead, broom in hand, Mama waited. The minute Mary and I opened the door-- boom. Mama lowered the broom bristles on top of our heads. After the first time we learned to swing the door wide, watch for the broom to come crashing down, then rush in. That only infuriated Mama more.

She marched us into the bathroom, one at a time, and instructed us to lean over the bathtub. She reached for Papa's razor strop and walloped our behinds and legs. Even though she closed the door, our screams could be heard throughout the

house. It was the warning cry for the others to behave because Mama was on the warpath.

After comparing notes, Mary and I pondered the best way to handle the stropping. The trick was to make a lot of noise the minute the leather touched your legs, and the punishment wouldn't last as long. Our natural instinct was to endure in tight-lipped silence, but we learned that self-restraint only earned us extra lashings. Mama needed to hear sounds of remorse. But she didn't want the neighbors hearing screams, so she stopped after two or three slaps.

It didn't take long to figure out that Mama never used the strop when Papa was around, so we planned our escapes after he got home from work. While Mama was occupied fixing his snack, we sneaked outdoors.

Once, when I was supposed to be watching Margie, I left her playing with some clothespins and slipped out for a quick turn at jump rope. I got lost in the chanting verses and forgot the time. The minute I saw Papa in his garden, I realized I had dallied too long. I dropped the rope as if it were on fire and dashed indoors, hoping Mama hadn't noticed my absence. Luckily, Margie was where I had left her, still amused with the clothespins. However, Mama wasn't so easily fooled.

"I don't remember giving you permission to play," she said, reaching out and pinching my arm. "You know you're not supposed to leave the baby alone. Now get in here and practice the piano. Mrs. Mello comes tomorrow and you'd better have your lesson prepared." Her swift hand whipped out again, but I dodged past her into the parlor and to the waiting piano, my refuge.

Baby Chicks

It is a peaceful Saturday morning and my sisters and I play in harmony. Mary and I dress our cut-out dolls, and the younger children play with their toys. Papa gazes at his little brood, and zips up his jacket as he gets ready to step outside.

"I'll have a little surprise for you when I come back," Papa says.

Mary and I are all ears as we lift our heads and wait for an explanation. Papa's blue eyes sparkle with mischief. He dons his well-creased fedora, and slides his hand around the brim until it dips over one eye. He opens the kitchen door, and is gone in a flash of mystery. Is he going to pick up used roller skates or maybe a wagon for Larry? Mary and I try to guess what the surprise might be.

Soon enough, Papa returns, carrying a cardboard box in his arms. We cluster around him, hopping up and down trying to get a peek. He raises the box above our heads, and we hear cheeping sounds. We guess his surprise and clamor, "Baby chicks, baby chicks. We want to see the baby chicks."

"Hold on now, don't make me drop them," he says, delight bubbling in his laughter. "Can't fool this crew, can I?"

"No," we chorus. Any disappointing thoughts of toys vanish with the excitement of the cheeping chicks.

"Okay, follow me, but not too closely."

The five of us traipse after him in parade formation, out the kitchen and down the cellar stairs, following our own Pied Piper.

"Don't forget your little sister," Mama reminds me. I turn back, whisk eighteen month old Margie into my arms, and join the others.

Papa sets the box down then uncovers a cage he has constructed on top of an old table. It has three wooden sides connected with wire mesh in the front. Fresh wood chips line the floor. It is in this pen that he gently drops the baby chicks. The tiny, yellow fluff balls butt against one another in confusion like bumper cars. They scatter wood chips everywhere, and try to adjust to their new home.

In one corner of the pen is an upside-down water bottle, which trickles into a trough. The chicks scamper over one another and tumble into the water until they calm down and learn to drink.

Above the cage hangs a light bulb which gives off enough heat to keep them cozy and warm. They huddle together, and we stand gazing at them until Papa says it's time to let them settle down. Reluctantly, we leave the chicks with promises from Papa that we can hold them in our hands tomorrow.

Even though we live in the city, there are no zoning laws and we are allowed to raise chickens in our backyard. It is fortunate for us because chicken is a mainstay of our diet. Mama says chickens and their eggs are good for us. Papa says chickens are easy to raise, and their manure enriches his garden. All this starts with baby chicks.

From one day to the next, the cheeping babies change. In a matter of weeks, they are sturdy enough to leave the cellar and be put outside with the hens. They are no longer soft and cuddly, and we don't hold them any more because their beaks are sharp. Soon they resemble the other chickens in the yard, and we lose interest in them.

Everyone has a hand in the care of the chickens. Papa feeds them, cleans out the coop, notices the good layers, and kills the poor layers and troublemakers. Junior gathers eggs, and I'm responsible for helping Mama pluck the feathers. Sometimes, Papa lets me feed the chickens.

"Scatter it like rainfall out in the yard," Papa instructs, "and those lazy chickens will fly off the roost. Then you can check under the straw for eggs."

I'm glad Papa tells me how to trick the chickens because I remember Junior's near miss when he tried to reach under a roosting hen, and she nearly pecked his eye. An empty nest is better.

One stubborn hen remains on her roost, and I work around her. Papa notices how I avoid her and says, "Watch this." He shakes the corn in the metal can, and the hen flies out squawking. I jump aside, nearly dropping the egg in my hand, and Papa laughs.

"You just have to be smarter than she is," Papa says, "and I know you are." His words make me feel strong inside. Next time, I'll know what to do.

I check all the vacated nests and am rewarded with three more eggs. Mama will be pleased.

On Saturday mornings, Mama sets a huge pot of water on to boil in preparation for plucking the chicken feathers. Papa makes his selection then wrings its neck. When the chicken is ready he brings it upstairs, and drops it into the pot of boiling water. The hot water helps to soften the feathers, but nothing softens the smell of that tedious task. Damp feathers cling to my fingers, and my nose quivers with the mixture of moist skin and wet straw. Mama and I work quickly and she patiently endures my complaints.

One day I am overjoyed when she decides that we can now afford the ten cents to have the chickens killed and plucked by a family in the neighborhood. It's my job to carry the chicken to the chicken-plucker's house, and I'm queasy about the best way to do this. Papa says I should carry the chicken upside down and hold on to her feet.

"Just show her who's boss," he says chuckling, folding the hen's wings underneath one another.

Seems the chickens sense my fear, and like to turn up their heads to try and peck my hand. Papa says the neck of a chicken isn't very flexible, but that's not how it seems to me. I settle on carrying it in a paper bag under my arm, worrying all the way that she'll peck a hole in the bag and get at me that way.

The following year when Mary is ten-- and old enough to take over that task--she has no problem. Papa shows her how to fold the chicken wings so that they lock in place and prevent flying. Mary follows Papa's instructions, tucks the chicken underneath her arm and off she goes without a moment's hesitation.

The time came when one chicken no longer fed our growing family. Mary said she could handle two chickens, but Mama sent Teresa, who was eight, to help her. Teresa had little experience with chickens, and wanted no part in this venture. She didn't care about folded wings and non-flexible necks. Mary put one chicken in a bag and handed it to Teresa, who held it away from her as far as possible. Then she tucked her chicken under her arm, and the two of them set off.

They didn't get very far, only across the street, when Teresa's chicken started moving around in the bag. She dropped it like a sizzling firecracker. The chicken hobbled into the neighbor's yard, still in the bag, and Mary yelled at Teresa to pick it up. Teresa started sniffing. She said she didn't know which way the chicken was facing, and was afraid it would peck her the minute she touched the bag.

"Oh, go home," Mary shouted. "What good are you, anyway."

Teresa ran home crying, and Mary was left to chase the moving bag while holding her own chicken. That was the first and last time Teresa was asked to carry a chicken.

But on this day, I don't have anyone to carry my chicken. It's a relief when I reach the house on Eagle Street, three blocks away, and can hand the chicken over to the husband of the lady who does the plucking. I follow him to the back of the garage, where others wait their turn. I stand and watch as he expertly handles the chicken who cowers in his hands. Swiftly he wrings the chicken's neck, and lowers

it into a pot of boiling water, just like at home. I try not to notice the floor, covered with chicken guts and feathers, and a familiar malodorous smell.

Off to the side, the chicken-plucker sits at a wooden wheel. The rim of the wheel has projecting rods with metal grips. She sets the wheel in motion, and holds the soaked chicken close to the rods. The metal clips grasp and pull the outer feathers with the spinning motion. Her steady arms hold tight, turning the chicken around on all sides. Sweat drips down her neck, and feathers fly everywhere. I move further away.

After a few turns on the wheel, she finishes the job by hand, and removes most of the smaller pin feathers. Then she hands the nude chicken to its owner, who drops her dime in a glass jar on the counter. More people arrive. We shuffle in line and wait our turn with friendly conversation, but we all keep an eye on our own chickens.

When I return home, Mama has me remove the pin feathers that have been missed by the chicken-plucker. Then she singes the fine hairs over the gas stove. I know Mama thinks the job is only half done, but to my way of thinking, it is ten cents well spent. I remember only too well the times Mama and I did the whole process, and don't even think of complaining.

On Sunday afternoon, we're all rewarded when Mama carries the steaming browned chickens to the table, stuffed with delicious dressing and surrounded with potatoes and carrots. She sets the platter down next to a side dish of peas. Her eyes seek mine and silently ask, "Well, was it worth the extra work?" My nod and smile are her answer.

Piano Lessons

My junior high years are a blur of hormones with Mama doing her best to keep them in check. When my girlfriends, Claudette and Marie, walk me home from school, trailing close behind us are Tony Santo Christo and David Aguiar. David lives up the hill from me and Tony lives near Markey's Meat Market. When Mama sends me to Markey's for a soup bone or pork roast, she wants to know why it takes me so long. Those "wolves at the door" she is so afraid of are howling.

With school out for the summer, my friends congregate on the wall across the street from the candy store. The coolness of the wall is an ideal spot on hot days. I see them now from the parlor window, where I'm set up with the ironing board and a basket full of wrinkled clothes.

"Are you paying attention?" Mama asks sharply, jerking my thoughts back indoors. She's teaching me how to put a crease in Papa's pants.

"You dampen the handkerchief lightly and lay it over the leg like this," she continues. "Then you slide the iron back and forth in a steady motion until the cloth is nearly dry. Don't take your eyes off it for a minute or you'll scorch the pants." I watch her closely as she presses both sides.

"Okay, now you try the other leg."

I dip my fingers into the dish of water, and sprinkle the handkerchief, like a blessing. Next, I position the pant leg, seam to seam on the ironing board, and lay the damp hanky on top. The iron hisses and steams, startling me for a moment. Soon I'm lulled by the pleasant puffs of steam, and the back and forth rhythm of the iron.

"Looks like you have it," Mama says. "You do the shirt sleeves the same way. Start with your father's shirts then do your brothers'. Call me if you have any questions. I'm going to start supper."

I finish the pants and start on the next pair. As I slide the iron over the crease, I'm drawn to laughter outside the open window. I see my friends licking popsicles and swinging their sandaled feet. They look so chummy there. I wonder what they're laughing at.

A burning smell jolts me back to the ironing board, and I quickly raise the iron. I notice a faint brown outline on the handkerchief and lift it to check Papa's pants. Thankfully, it hasn't burned through. I crane my neck to see where Mama is. She is dicing and sizzling onions in a frying pan and doesn't seem to notice. I decide to take Mama's advice and pay attention. If I hurry, I'll have time to join my

friends. I check the basket of remaining clothes, and groan at the writhing octopus of sleeves and pants legs, piled and waiting.

Much later, I bring the empty ironing basket to Mama and ask to go out to play.

“You know you can’t go outside after you iron. Your face will freeze up.”

This is one of Mama’s old-wives tales. She says the contrast of the cool outdoors, and the steam from the iron can disfigure your mouth. Smile or grimace and your face will forever wear that look. It’s a scary thought, and I haven’t had the courage to test it.

“There’s just enough time for you to practice your lesson,” Mama says.

This week, Mrs. Mello has promised me one of the popular songs, if I hand in a good lesson. Even though I enjoy classical music, I want to learn songs I can sing while I play. When I hear Vic Damon sing, **Sitting by the Window** and Hank Williams bleat, “**I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry**,” the lyrics speak to my very being. I feel somebody out there understands me.

The next day when Mrs. Mello arrives, she not only forgets the Hank Williams’ song, but she tells Mama she’s retiring at the end of the month. All I can think of is now I’ll never get to play popular music. After my lesson, I hear Mrs. Mello tell Mama that the Sisters of Mercy at the Convent on Whipple Street have openings for some of her students. One phone call later, and it’s all arranged for me to start lessons with the Sisters next week.

Not everyone is happy about the new arrangement. Because the Convent is about two miles away and involves crossing Main Street, Junior is dragged into being my walking companion. The first time we start out, he walks so fast I barely keep up.

“Wait,” I call, “you’re going too fast.”

Junior stomps his feet and swings around to face me. His face is red and he’s not smiling.

“Gosh darn it, Dolly, I could be playing baseball.”

I hang my head and mutter, “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, it’s not your fault,” he says, and slows his steps to match mine. “But I know you can walk faster. What’s the matter? Are you afraid of the nuns?”

“A little,” I say. “I’m not used to them like you are.” Junior attends St. Louis School and has since the sixth grade. The sisters love him because he has such a beautiful voice, and he sings in all their school performances.

“Don’t worry. I’ve heard you practicing your lessons. You’ll do fine. Now let’s get a move on. We’re almost there.”

We ring the Convent bell and are ushered inside by one of the sisters. She asks my name and tells me to take a seat. She disappears down the polished hallway, her black habit flowing behind her like the wings of a blackbird. As soon as she is gone, Junior says, "I'm going now. If I'm not here when your lesson is over, wait for me by that bench we passed out front."

He gives me a big smile, showing his chipped front tooth where he was hit with a baseball bat, and leaves me comfortably settled in a soft, cushioned chair. Piano music tinkles in the background, and I take the time to look around.

Hanging on the walls are pictures of four nuns in their black and white habits. You can see where the heavily starched coif presses against their foreheads, and pushes their cheeks forward. It looks as if all that pressure would give you a headache. I study the pictures of the nuns, wondering which one will be my teacher.

My thoughts are interrupted when the music stops. A door opens and a girl my age walks towards me.

"Are you Dolly?" she asks.

"Yes," I answer.

She points down the hushed hallway to the open doorway.

"Sister's waiting for you. She asked me to tell you to walk right in."

I want to ask her if sister is strict or nice, but all I say is, "Thanks." I slide off the chair, smooth down my dress and walk towards the open door, carrying my sheet music.

It is so different from having Mrs. Mello come to our noisy house, where Mama scatters my younger brothers and sisters outdoors to play, and I clear off a kitchen chair and drag it to the parlor for Mrs. Mello to sit on. At the convent, there is no confusion.

I look forward to our routine each week. I learn to walk fast, and arrive flushed and out of breath. Junior opens the door, and we agree to meet by the bench. Once he leaves, I enter a world of waxed hardwood floors that sweep down endless hallways. Hushed musical notes slide out the transom and float in the air. I sit and relax, feeling my heartbeat slow down. I inhale the silence and wait.

Weeks pass. One afternoon, Junior's pace seems faster than usual. He gets ahead of me, impatiently turns around and says, "I'm meeting some friends, and you're going to make me late. Come on now. Shake a leg."

I run to catch up, but keep falling behind. Without thinking, I step off the curb and start to dash across Main Street. Screeching brakes stop me in my tracks. A bus comes to a halt, a door flies open and a frantic driver leaps out. I'm more

ashamed than frightened, and run and hide behind some parked cars. I see the bus driver searching around and underneath his bus, but I remain hidden.

Seconds later, Junior finds me cowering behind the cars. He yanks me by my arms and checks me for any bruises. When he feels certain that the only thing injured is my pride, he drags me towards the bus driver. He explains the situation, and shows the driver that I am unhurt. The relieved driver appears breathless, and splutters something at me. He notices Junior's grip on my arm, and decides to leave the reprimand to him. He wipes his flushed face with his handkerchief and returns to the bus.

"You ninny," Junior cries out. "You could have been killed. That poor driver was sure you were under his bus. You nearly gave him a stroke. What's the matter with you?"

"I was trying to catch up," I stammered, as I brushed gravel and dirt from my dress. "You walk too fast."

"What do you mean, I walk too fast? You're eleven years old. Do you need me to hold your hand to cross the street?" He pauses a minute to let that sink in, and then hammers at me again. "It's my job to get you to your lesson safely, and it's your job to pay attention. No more daydreaming on Main Street."

He releases my arm but stays close to my side. "Next thing you know, Sister Flora will be phoning Mama, wondering where you are. Then we'll both be in trouble."

I know Junior isn't as angry with me as he is scared. His face is as red as the bus driver's, and there are beads of perspiration in the fine hairs on his upper lip. Now that the danger is over, I shiver, thinking about what almost happened. I can't wait to get to the convent to say a silent prayer of thanks. Not until I step inside does the shivering stop. I take a deep breath, release my fear with a sigh, and become calm.

That afternoon after my lesson, Junior waits at the usual spot. Though we don't discuss it on the way home, I know he won't tell Mama what nearly happened. That is our secret, and a lesson I will never forget.

Clam Digging

Just when I think my summer will be nothing but drudgery, a pleasant surprise comes my way thanks to *Tia* Maria, the most unlikely aunt to link with fun. In the shadowy way that children absorb family stories, we know that *Tia* entered the convent when she was a young girl, but she didn't stay. I think it was because she wouldn't follow other people's rules.

Even so, she's very holy. She attends Mass daily, not just on Sundays. When *Tia* kneels in the church pew with rosary beads trickling through her fingers, an aura of spirituality rises from her bowed head like puffs of vapor from an incense thurible.

Not only does she live near the church, but she's good friends with Louisa, the pastor's housekeeper. It is her friendship with Louisa that brings about my good fortune. I am invited to accompany them for a week's vacation at Father Bettencourt's summer cottage. Much as I complain of the burdens of being the oldest girl in the family, I can see that there are also advantages. When Mary hears the news, she grabs my arm and fixes smoldering brown eyes on me.

"I bet you think you're so special, going to the ocean for a week. Well, I know for a fact that you're going to have to say prayers every day, and clean house for Father Bettencourt. You know how tough he is. You'll probably have to kneel in the sand and say penance."

I don't believe her for a minute, but it does make me wonder. Why am I being invited and whose idea is it? Is this Mama's plan to keep me away from my friends? I decide not to question my luck but accept it as my due. Like Papa always says, "When good fortune comes your way, smile and give thanks."

The summer cottage is an hour's drive and a world away from home. As soon as Father turns the car engine off I fly out the door, kick off my sandals, and race to the water. Lapping waves spread their fingers to tickle my toes. The pounding surf rises and swells. I fling out my arms as if to embrace the entire sea before me. I take a deep breath and inhale the ocean air. A fine spray mists my face and I lick the salt from my lips. I want to jump into the waves, but remember I can't swim.

Tia calls, and I remember my duties. I slip my sandals on, and hurry to help carry bags inside the cottage. To think this sandy beach will be out my front door every morning when I awaken.

“Can I go back to the beach later?” I ask *Tia*. Father Bettencourt turns to look at me and amazingly, a smile lifts up the corners of his mouth. Maybe he’s not as stern as he seems in church.

That evening, I wash for dinner, and help set the table. When Father appears in a collarless short-sleeved shirt and slacks, I am struck dumb. I stare at his open neck and the skin of his arms, and realize he looks like any other man. Wait until I tell Mary.

After dinner, *Tia* tells me it’s time to dig for quahogs. In their cotton flowered dresses, hose and lace up shoes, *Tia* and Louisa parade to the beach carrying canvas chairs. I follow in my bare feet, holding a sand rake and bucket. With shafts of light from the cottage to guide us, we set the chairs by the water’s edge. *Tia* and Louisa sit close by, and tell me about tides and hiding places of these larger clams, so named by the Algonquin Tribe. We watch for geysers of water to shoot out of the sand, and the air bubbles left in their wake.

“Dig with your shovel and rake in the quahog,” *Tia* directs, pointing her finger where tiny squirt holes have become visible. “It looks like a big one.”

I use my shovel and claw with my fingers until I feel something hard. I am rewarded with my first clam, which is partially open, but instantly clamps shut in self-protection. Like a light bulb going off in my head, I suddenly understand the expression, “to clam up,” when you refuse to answer a question that might get you into trouble. From now on, it will always remind me of a summer evening by the shore.

I drop the clam in the bucket of water, and scan the sand for more spurting geysers. *Tia* says I have the hang of it, and she and Louisa return to the comfort of the porch.

Once my bucket is full, I carry it inside. After an overnight soaking to rinse off all the sand, Louisa will steam the smaller clams --steamers-- in seasoned water. Then she will pile them on a plate, and pass it around the table with a little of the clam juice. We’ll pull the black stockings off the tips, dip them in the juice, and swallow the delicate clams nearly whole. Along with sliced tomatoes and corn, we shall feast.

If I find enough quahogs, Louisa will stuff them with day old bread which she moistens with clam juice. To this she will add diced clam meat, and lots of chopped garlic, onions, *chourico* and fresh parsley, four ingredients which form the basis of Portuguese cooking. This special treat is called stuffed quahogs.

Each evening, after dishes are washed, I dash to the beach with my bucket and rake. The others carry their coffee outside, and sit on the porch with unopened books in their laps. Sea gulls swoop by, their keen voices ringing out as they search

for dinner. A strong scent of salt and seaweed tingles my nostrils. Pink and lavender ribbons streak the sky. I skip along the edge of the beach and play tag with the water. My footprints, like the days of this incredible week, gradually fade and disappear.

The gathering darkness puts me in a reflective mood. Someday, I promise myself, I'll learn to swim. I'll jump into the crashing waves and let them carry me back to shore. Papa was right about being thankful, and I try to show my appreciation by setting the table each evening before *Tia* asks. Mary was wrong about my duties. Little is expected of me in this cottage by the sea, and it all feels like child's play.

My thoughts are interrupted by *Tia* calling out in Portuguese, "Ines," --disdaining my nickname-- "don't you want to come inside?"

"In a minute," I answer.

The sky is dark now, and stars sparkle above me. The screen door slams closed once and then again. I gather my things and follow the beam cast by the porch light. The empty rocking chairs sway with the evening breeze. Inside, on the counter, coffee cups are rinsed and left to dry on a towel. I'm the last to get ready for bed.

Later, as I slip between the sheets, I think of ways to make myself useful during the remaining days in hopes of being invited back next summer. In fairness, Mary should have her turn, but I push that irksome thought aside. The last sounds I hear are the ebb and flow of the soothing surf.

Closed Doors and Open Windows

Like the ebb and flow of the tide, summer slipped into fall, and the rhythm of another school year. The first holiday we looked forward to would be Thanksgiving, with Mama's special dressing stuffed into chickens. Since we raised chickens, we didn't know the taste of turkey, nor did we miss it. Papa checked the hen house every day. He said he had his eye on two plump and lazy layers.

This year, George would be eighteen on Monday, three days before the holiday, and I would be twelve on Thanksgiving Day. It would be a double celebration. However, there was to be no celebration that year of 1949. On Thanksgiving morning, Papa hurried Mama to the hospital to have a baby. Paul was born on November 25th, the day after Thanksgiving. When Papa came home with the news, he glanced at my long face. He hung up his coat, and removed the artificial hook. He laid it on the dresser then came into the kitchen where I was sulking.

"What's the matter, Dolly?" he asked. "Aren't you happy to have a baby brother?"

I had missed out on our festive chicken dinner, and the birthday cake with my name and George's printed on the frosting. The house was different with Mama gone. She was the person who made things happen when they should. I tried to hide my feelings of disappointment.

"Yes, Papa," I said, "I'm happy." But my smile felt tight.

"I know. You missed your birthday celebration, didn't you?"

I had such mixed feelings of selfishness and disappointment. I nodded my head, barely holding back the tears.

Papa sat in his easy chair, absently rubbing his sore stump. "Come sit here by me," he beckoned.

I pulled a chair close and prepared myself for a lecture.

"We would never forget your birthday," Papa began. "Only, sometimes, life has a way of changing your plans." His eyes seemed to drift away for a moment. He adjusted the stocking on his stump and brought it close to his body. Then he shifted in his chair, and rested his eyes on me.

"Don't you worry little lady. We'll find a way to make it up to you. Remember, when a door closes in your face, you open up a window."

He caught my attention with that comment. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Wait until Mama comes home. We'll talk about it then. But I can tell you one thing. You're going to feel pretty silly about that gloomy face."

I didn't think he had noticed. I decided then and there to be as cheerful as possible. It would be fun to have another sweet baby in the house.

School resumed after the holiday weekend, and I fell into the routine of oldest sister, organizing my younger sisters for school. At the end of the following week, Mama came home with baby Paul, and we all clustered around him. He had black hair and lots of it, and Mama seemed rested and happy. It felt so good to be together again.

One evening, a few days later as we finished supper, Papa said with a glint in his eyes, "As soon as the dishes are done, and Mama feeds the baby, I have a little surprise for all of you."

Immediately, we set into action. Mary scrambled to clear the table, and I set water on the stove for dishes. Teresa put the chairs away and swept under the table. Rita and Larry kept two-year old Margie amused and out of our way. We became an efficient team of well-trained housekeepers with no squabbling over whose turn it was to do what chore. Papa sat in his easy chair, calmly reading the paper, not missing a thing.

Finally, we gathered together, chores done and the baby asleep. Mama sat on a kitchen chair and pulled the *bonca* near. The little bench Papa made, with a drawer for diapers, was just the right height for her to rest her feet. Margie spotted Mama's empty lap and ran to sit on it. She was rewarded with a hug. Papa, noticing we were ready said, "Well, Mama, do you think we should tell them?" Mama smiled and nodded her head, the signal for Papa to begin.

He carefully folded his newspaper and put it aside. He stood up, reached into his shirt pocket, and with one hand, fanned out five tickets. We sat still as the sleeping baby, all eyes on those tickets. He cleared his throat and began. "We all remember Thanksgiving was a little different this year, and a disappointment to some with birthdays." His eyes locked onto mine, and I sheepishly looked away. I knew he meant me, because George was in his freshman year at Tufts and didn't come home for Thanksgiving this year.

"We're thankful to have Mama back home with a beautiful and healthy baby, and that is our true Thanksgiving." He paused to let that thought settle in.

"But, I promised Dolly we'd find a way to make things up to her, and here it is." He waved the tickets in front of our attentive faces. "Firestone is having their annual Christmas party. However, this year they have also given us tickets for children ages four to thirteen, to attend the circus."

We were spellbound, but quickly figured out who the lucky five would be. George and Junior were too old, and Margie and the baby too young. I clapped my hands in delight.

“A real circus, Papa, with lions and tigers?” asked Mary. “And will we still get Christmas presents?”

Rita and Larry jumped up and down, not really sure what was happening, only that it was exciting and everyone was smiling.

“All that and more,” Papa answered. “And now, everyone get ready for bed. Remember, you have school tomorrow.”

We had never been to a circus, and I wondered how we’d ever manage the weeks of waiting. Mother Nature managed to keep us occupied when, a few days later, we awoke to thick snowflakes steadily falling. It snowed for two days. We located our sleds, and made plans to belly-flop down the hill. I was having a hard time fitting into my red boots, and grabbed an old pair of my brother’s. With all that snow, no one would notice.

It was a different story as we got ready for school the following morning. Hard as I tried to stuff my growing feet into my red boots, they didn’t fit.

I groaned, “Oh, no, what will I wear to school?”

Mary, digging through the box of boots, heard me. She had been coveting those boots with the fake fur trim, ever since I got them from my cousin. A grin spread across her face, and she grabbed them out of my hands. Heavy wet snow continued to fall, and the clock was ticking. If I didn’t leave soon, I’d be late for school.

“Guess I’ll have to walk in the snow without boots,” I bravely attempted.

Before you could say “wet feet,” Mama was at my side holding out my brother’s black boots with the metal cleats.

“Here’s some you can wear.”

“Those are boys’ boots,” I protested.

“Your feet won’t know the difference,” Mama said. “Now hurry, time marches on.”

“Yeah, Dolly, time is marching on,” Mary gloated. I reached out to punch her, but she was too quick.

It wasn’t enough that I was frequently late for school, but now I had the added embarrassment of wearing boy’s boots. I slipped them on, clasped the cleats and flew out the door. Tramping the three blocks to school, I pondered how difficult my life was. Remembering Papa’s philosophy, I tried to think positive. Maybe there would be new boots for me this Christmas.

Finally, the day we had been awaiting, arrived. We were driven to the circus by a friend of the family, and shown to our seats. The five of us sat together, mesmerized by the dancing lights, blaring music, lumbering elephants, and the brave girl with spangles on her skirt who stood on top of one of the elephants.

Our dazzled eyes darted from one ring to the next. In one lighted circle there were two clowns, juggling bowling pins in the air. When one of the clowns dropped his pin and stooped over to pick it up, the other clown knocked him flat on his big red nose. Rita and Larry giggled with joy.

Teresa and I shuddered when the tight-rope dancer seemed to totter before dashing across the wire. Then my eyes shifted to the acrobat hanging from a rope, clenched with her teeth. Mary leaned forward in her seat when the animals appeared, and gasped when the lion-tamer snapped his whip. All about us, activity swirled.

Before we knew it, the brass band played their last song and the circus was over. We were herded into a large room where Santa sat, surrounded by heaping piles of gift-wrapped packages. I knew from previous years that the large, flat packages held games like checkers and puzzles. When it was your turn to go up, Santa asked your age and you got to choose a boy or girl gift from the appropriate pile.

Feeling a little awkward, I stood back a little. I wanted to see if there was a box that might hold boots, but I could tell by the shapes that there were no boots in that pile. I chose a thin gift, hoping it might be cardboard cut-out dolls. I enjoyed dressing them in their paper outfits that fastened down with folding tabs.

We left that magical place, clutching gaily wrapped gifts under our arms, and holding storybook-boxes of Lifesavers in our hands. After we were dropped off, we charged the kitchen door, talking all at once about the wonders we had seen. Mama wiped her hands on her apron, and told us to put the gifts in a closet. Later, she would hide them in her bedroom until Christmas Eve, when they would go under the tree. Some years, they were the best gifts of all.

When we started to remove our coats, Mama said, "Wait a minute. You can all play outside until supper is ready, but stay in the yard."

Mary pushed and shoved to be the first out. I started to follow, but Mama put a hand on my shoulder and a finger to her lips. Once everyone was outdoors, Mama motioned me towards her bedroom. I spotted two bags of clothes on the chair and a third, bulky bag on the floor.

“*Tia* Irene stopped by while you were at the Christmas party. She left something I thought might interest you,” Mama said, pointing to the bulky bag.

“Go ahead, open it.”

Inside were my cousin’s outgrown boots, now mine. A smile lit up my face when I saw the fur trim, and I glowed like a Christmas bulb. I remembered Papa’s saying about closed doors and open windows, and knew he was right again. I felt like hugging Mama, but in our family hugs were for babies. So, instead of running outside to play I said, “Need any help with supper?” Mama’s smile let me know I had said the right thing.

Pomp and Circumstance

Snow boots have long been put away and spring is in the air. One day Junior comes home from school with exciting news. He waits until we're all together snacking at the kitchen table. He stands at attention, vocalizes a drum roll then says, "Sister Jean has asked me to sing the Ave Maria at my graduation ceremony."

"Why Junior, that's wonderful," says Mama.

No one is happier about Junior's eighth grade graduation than Mama. He should have graduated two years ago, but he skipped school so often, his grades suffered and he was kept behind. For a while, it didn't look like it would ever happen. Because of Junior's laziness and truancy, he had to repeat sixth grade at the McDonough Public School. It wasn't the first time he'd been held back, but this time Mama stepped in.

Somehow, she scraped up the tuition money, and transferred him to St. Louis School. She hoped the nuns would straighten him out. It seems Mama's plan worked. Now, while Junior talked about his approaching graduation, Mama beamed at him.

"Not only that," he continued, staring directly at me, "Sister said they needed someone to play **Pomp and Circumstance** when the graduates march in, and I told her my sister Dolly could do it."

I nearly choked on my milk and graham crackers. All winter long, I've practiced lessons and played chords for Papa's songs, but I've never performed in public. I start sweating just thinking about it.

"You mean, play in front of all the students and their parents?" I splutter.

"Sure."

"But, I'm only twelve years old," I groan.

"You've been taking lessons for years, and you're always playing. Here's a chance to show your stuff. You'll be great."

"What a wonderful idea," Mama chimes in. As far as Mama is concerned, everything Junior says today is wonderful.

"I'll need a special dress and everything," I say, hoping to dampen Mama's enthusiasm with the thought of the added expense.

"Oh, don't worry," Junior pipes in. "The piano player is always tucked away in the background. The only one they'll notice is me, when I sing the **Ave Maria**."

He smiles so angelically, I can understand why the sisters put up with him.

“Well, guess that’s all the news for now. Finish your snack, Dolly, and help me with the paper route. I’ll be waiting.”

He dashes outdoors while I wipe my chin and collect myself. For someone so lazy about school work, Junior is ending his school days with a bang of enthusiasm. He’s like a snowball rolling down a hill, and there is no stopping him. I run outside to collect my stack of papers. I’ll have time to think about what just happened while I deliver them.

Last year, when Junior was in seventh grade, his school put on a variety show. He convinced me to sing a duet with him, even though I didn’t attend St. Louis School. We grew up listening to Papa sing on the radio, and learned harmony from imitating the Andrews Sisters. Music was as natural to our family as attending church on Sunday.

The song we chose was **I Wonder Why**. It has two separate melodies that blend and chase one another in perfect harmony. We had sung it many times and I was comfortable singing with Junior in front of an audience. Playing the piano felt a little more risky. If I made a mistake, everyone would know.



It’s been a few weeks since Junior dropped his surprise on me. My piano teacher gave me a copy of **Pomp and Circumstance** and I practice every day. I love the feel of the resonant chords and the cadence of the march. The slow, steady pulse calms my jitters, and makes me feel I can do this. In fact, I’m excited about playing in public.

Towards the end of May, Junior celebrates his sixteenth birthday, making him nearly three years older than most of his classmates. Two weeks later, the night before graduation, Junior practices his song and I practice my march. Mama smiles while she irons my best school dress, and Junior’s white shirt and navy pants. This graduation feels like a family achievement, though we’re all getting a little tired of hearing **Pomp and Circumstance**.

The next day, wearing Mama’s heart-shaped locket for good luck, I walk with confidence to St. Louis School auditorium. My fingers rest easy on the piano keys, though my heart flutters. I wait for Sister Jean’s signal, and she nods her head ever so slightly, for me to begin. After weeks of practice, my fingers respond perfectly. I breathe a sigh of relief when the last student sits in place.

There are a few speeches and then it's time for Junior's solo. The room becomes very quiet, but he doesn't seem a bit nervous. Being an altar boy, Junior is familiar with the Latin words, and he loves an audience. He sings the last note and it fades in the air. There is utter silence for a moment. Then the hall is charged with enthusiastic applause. I look for Sister Jean to see her reaction.

Can those be tears she is wiping from her eyes? I will always wonder if they were tears of joy at hearing Junior's beautiful tenor voice, or of relief that he was finally moving on.

Menses

After Junior's graduation, life returns to normal. I continue with piano lessons, help Junior with his paper route, massage Rita's leg muscles and do chores. The summer of 1950 swiftly becomes fall. I'm nearly thirteen and in the eighth grade. The next graduation will be mine. But that seems a long way off. I focus on what's happening now.

During gym class, I notice some of the girls are allowed to sit on the bench along the far wall. The rest of us race back and forth on the basketball court. I don't spend much time wondering about it because I'm having too much fun. Being small and wiry, I'm generally placed as a guard, and I enjoy the constant action. When I come home for lunch on gym days, Mama is amazed at my appetite.

Walking to class after lunch one day, I see my friends Ann and Pat, and run to join them. Their heads are close together in conversation, but they break apart as I approach. I notice Pat holds a piece of paper in her hand.

"What's that?" I ask, pointing to her fingers.

"Oh, hi Dolly. This is a note signed by my mother, excusing me from gym this week."

"Why doesn't your mom want you taking gym?" I ask.

Pat gives me a look with raised eyebrows. "You know," she says.

"Are you sick?"

Ann and Pat giggle. "You might say that," Pat answers.

"You don't look sick," I persist.

They laugh and lean towards one another. Clearly, they have a secret they aren't going to share with me.

"Tell me what's so funny," I bravely demand.

"We can't."

"Why, not?" I ask, confused.

They exchange knowing glances. Then Pat says kindly, "Because it's not the right time."

I come to a halt, feeling hurt and excluded. Pat takes my arm.

"Come on," she says, "we're not being mean. It's just that it has something to do with our bodies and your mother should tell you when it's time."

I'm thinking, if I have to wait for Mama's explanation, I'll never know what this is about. But I pretend to understand, hide my feelings and walk alongside them.

A few months after this conversation, I am awakened during the night with stomach cramps and a sticky wetness between my legs. I slip out of bed quietly, careful not to disturb my sisters. I reach the bathroom, latch the door and remove my underpants. I see spots of blood, and my heart races. I stare in disbelief, wondering where the blood came from and how to deal with it. When someone tries to open the door, I'm startled and hurriedly rinse my underpants in the sink.

"Open up, Dolly," Mama says softly, jiggling the door knob.

"Wait a minute," I say. I toss the panties in the hamper and in my haste bang the lid. I slip on my pajama bottoms then open the door a crack. Mama squeezes in, latching it behind her.

"What are you doing up in the middle of the night?" she asks, her eyes darting around the tiny bathroom. She raises the hamper lid and lifts out my wet panties. I turn my head in shame.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" It's as if she already knows the answer, but she waits for my explanation. I tell her about the stomach cramps and the spots of blood.

"Ah," she sighs, "I figured as much. Wait here and don't let anyone else in."

I'm relieved that Mama isn't upset with me. She acts like this is normal.

She leaves the bathroom and returns in minutes. In her hands are strips of white cotton sheeting, safety pins and clean underpants. She shows me how to layer several strips to form a pad, and where to pin it on my underwear. "I guess I'll have to get you a belt," Mama murmurs. A belt? Now I'm really puzzled.

Mama motions me to put the padded underwear on. "Here are some extras," she says, and hands me several more strips. "Be sure to wash the soiled ones and dry them for next month," she instructs.

I stand like one of those mummies we studied about in class, wrapped in silence.

"What's happening to my body?" The question pops out before I can think clearly.

"What's happening?" Mama repeats. "Life is happening. This is all part of life." She shrugs and unlatches the bathroom door, silencing any further questions. I realize this will be the extent of my information. Mama returns to her bedroom, and I to mine.

In the morning, I almost think I dreamed the whole experience, except for the fullness between my legs and stomach cramps. Mama notices me gently rubbing my stomach and offers me a cup of tea. Mary, never one to be ignored, asks, "Why should she have tea? Is she sick?" Not wanting to call further attention to myself, I refuse the tea and hurry through morning chores.

On my walk to school, I try to make sense of this change in my body. My mind wanders to the afternoon Ann and Pat had their heads together, giggling over the gym excuse. I have a feeling this bleeding and their private conversation is all tied together. Now that I am one of them, I'll ask them all the questions Mama didn't answer.

Somehow, I get through the rest of the week. Mama doesn't say another word about my condition. Mary, ever observant, suspects something and asks, "How come you're always in the bathroom? And what are those rags you have hanging on the line?"

"None of your business," I reply and she walks off in a huff. I know it won't be long and I'll be explaining the monthlies to Mary, but for now I need to learn more myself.

However, it isn't Mary who benefits from my meager knowledge, but Teresa. The following year, at the age of ten, Teresa gets her period and thinks she is dying. She runs to Mama, crying hysterically. Mama gathers a few supplies, takes her to the bathroom and latches the door. Somehow, this business of life has completely passed by Mary.

That night in bed, after Teresa is asleep, Mary whispers, "What's going on with Teresa?"

"I think she has started her period. But it's something that's not supposed to happen until she's thirteen."

Mary lies there quietly, but I can feel her mind working overtime.

"So that's what you're doing in the bathroom all the time, washing out those rags. How disgusting."

"Well, what about you?" I ask.

"What about me?"

"How come you don't bleed every month?"

"That's never going to happen to me," she says, and rolls over on her side of the bed.

Eventually, Mama brings Mary to visit Doctor Costa who assures her that Mary is a healthy and normal thirteen year old. Three years later, when Mary is sixteen, she awakes one morning with stomach cramps. She has seen me often enough, clutching my stomach in discomfort, and suspects what might be happening. She shakes me awake with outrage in her eyes. "I think I'm bleeding. How do I make it stop?"

I blink awake and say, "Even you can't make it stop. Come with me." I find the supplies, latch the bathroom door and pass on my limited knowledge. "Don't shampoo your hair or take tub baths when you have your monthlies, also called

your period. When you run out of rags, tear sheets into strips. There's a bureau drawer in the parlor, stuffed with old sheets. Don't let Mama catch you tearing good sheets. And, hot tea helps with the cramps."

Most of my knowledge was scarce and incorrect, based on old-wives' tales. Seems Ann and Pat didn't know much more than I did, or maybe they weren't comfortable sharing. I could have avoided many unpleasant experiences in school, had I known how to maintain proper hygiene, while attending to the changes in my body. Like the time I didn't make the padding thick enough, and stained my dress.

I prayed no one would notice until I had a chance to go home at lunchtime, and change my clothes. As quickly as I learned, I passed information on to my sisters.

I would be a nursing student in college before I fully understood the biology of menstruation. And in 1961, as a young school nurse, I faced a class of nervous fifth grade girls and found myself explaining body changes and menses. Hopefully, I calmed their fears, as well as educated them. I had come full circle.

The Prom

“What are you wearing to the prom?” I ask Claudette and Marie.

It’s Friday afternoon and we’re walking home as we have every school day for the past three years. Our eighth grade prom is two weeks away and very much on my mind.

“I’m wearing a powder blue dress from Cherry and Webb,” Claudette says with a dreamy smile.

“Um-m-m. Mine is mint green,” says Marie, “and that’s all I’m saying about it. What’s yours like, Dolly?”

“Pale yellow,” I answer. What I don’t say is that I’m borrowing it from my cousin Evelyn.

“Powder blue, mint green and pale yellow. We’re going to look like salt water taffy,” laughs Marie.

“Pink taffy!” Claudette exclaims. That’s exactly the shade of my lipstick. What color are you wearing, Dolly?”

“My mother doesn’t allow me to wear lipstick.”

“Not even to the prom?”

“Not until I’m sixteen,” I reply.

“Wow.” Claudette says. “Your mom is really strict.”

I don’t know how to answer her without being disloyal, so I shrug my shoulders.

Claudette gushes, “I’m carrying my older sister’s wrist purse with my make-up inside. We’ll wait for you by the front door of the school gym and fix you up.”

My eyes widen and my jaw drops.

“Don’t worry,” she says, “you can wipe it off before you go home.”

“O-kay,” I answer enthusiastically, seeds of rebellion peppering my thoughts. We reach my corner with the lipstick issue settled.

“See you on Monday,” I call, as they continue down Division Street.

I’m surprised I want to go to the prom because I don’t know how to dance. Ever since Mama told me I’ll be going to Mount Saint Mary Academy in the fall, I’ve been feeling sad at leaving my friends behind. No one from my eighth grade class is going to an Academy except for Ann Marie, but she’s going to Sacred Heart. The others will be going to the public school, Durfee High. That’s where the prom will be held, and Claudette and Marie already refer to it as their gym.

The night of the prom is a perfect evening with a gentle breeze. It fluffs the delicate netting over the long skirt, and the taffeta makes a swishing sound as I glide down Diman Street. It's not salt water taffy I'm reminded of, but a billowing field of daisies. The skirt is a little long with my flat shoes, so I walk carefully. Mama couldn't hem it because Evelyn needs to wear her dress next week.

As I reach William Street, I stop by Pat's house to see if she has left yet. When her mom sees me looking through the link fence, she gets up from her chair on the porch, and walks towards me. She opens the gate and says, "Here, let me get a better look. My, don't you look nice."

"Thank you."

"I've been sitting here in the yard watching all the girls and some of the boys in their fancy dress clothes. It's like a parade of flowers." She sighs.

I stand on tiptoe to look over her shoulder.

"If you're looking for Pat, she left with Ann a few minutes ago. You can catch up if you hurry."

"Okay. Bye Mrs. Arruda." She waves her fingers and goes back to her chair.

I turn quickly, and in that movement snag the netting of my dress on the fence. I feel the rip and freeze. I look down and decide it's not too noticeable, so I continue the few blocks to the high school gym. I'm glad Mama is handy with needle and thread.

Claudette and Marie stand by the gym door, waiting for me. Their dresses are new but mine is just as pretty.

"What took so long?" Claudette asks. "Most everyone is inside already."

She takes out her tiny mirror and helps me with the lipstick. It feels waxy and I start to lick it off. "Don't do that," she says. "You'll get used to the feel of it."

She snaps her purse shut, and we open the gym doors to a blast of music. The lights are dim but I see decorations of crepe paper balls and streamers hanging from the ceiling. All the boys are on one side and the girls on the other. A few couples are dancing, but mostly the girls simper and the boys swagger. I hear someone call my name and spot Ann and Pat. They come over to join us.

"Isn't this fun? Come with us and we'll get some punch."

As soon as we have our punch, I decide now is the time to tell my friends I won't be seeing them in the fall. I feel a little self-conscious being the center of attention.

"What? You're leaving us?" Marie squeals.

“For a girl’s school? You won’t know anyone there.” Pat says.

Just then, Tony Santo Christo comes over. “What’s this I hear? You’re not coming to Durfee with us?”

“My mother says Durfee is too rough.”

“I’ll protect you,” he says, and we all laugh easily. It’s really a joke because Tony is almost as short as I am, but he is wiry and fast on his feet.

“I know the real reason,” he says, strutting with his hands in his pockets and his chest puffed out. “Your mother doesn’t want you around us handsome guys. She wants you to become a nun.” We all laugh at such a silly idea.

The evening continues with us talking about the future. I promise to stay in touch, but somehow it feels as if my friends and I are already separated by an invisible chasm. After a while, I decide I’ve had enough. I say good-bye to my friends and head towards the exit.

“Wait,” Tony says, “you haven’t danced.”

“I don’t know how to dance.”

“There’s nothing to it. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He places his hand on the small of my back, and an electric jolt goes through me. After a few false starts, where I step on his shoes, I begin to relax and enjoy the music. It feels good to be dancing in this beautiful dress. After the set, Tony says he’ll walk me home. He lives down the hill from me, near Claudette and Marie. I wave good-bye to my friends.

“Just a minute,” Claudette calls, running over waving a Kleenex. I had forgotten all about the lipstick. She supervises me as I remove all traces.

“We’ll remove the evidence,” she says and takes the stained Kleenex from my hand. “Your mom will never know.”

I take one last look around the gym, and leave. Tony and I walk side by side, and suddenly I feel tongue-tied.

“You’re pretty quiet,” Tony says. “Aren’t you happy about your new school?”

“My mom says I can concentrate on getting a good education.”

“No boys to distract you, she means,” and he chuckles. “Well, you’re pretty smart. Maybe your mom is right. But we’re sure going to miss you.”

When we reach my house, Tony and I shake hands. He gives me a teasing look and says, “Now, I’m going to have to find another short girlfriend.”

I feel my cheeks blush and stand there gaping, while he saunters down the hill, whistling softly.

Red-Buckled Shoes

The frisky children you see playing in our backyard are my six-year old sister Rita and five-year old brother Larry. To see Rita chase and tackle Larry to the ground, you'd never know she is handicapped. With rosy cheeks and thick flying pigtails, she's the picture of health. It's when she runs after him, limping and hobbling with the metal brace strapped around her leg, that you remember she has polio. Her movements are clumsy, but she always catches him then orders him on to the next activity.

His trusting brown eyes and Dutch-boy haircut-- Papa's specialty-- suit his role of the happy follower. He never questions her authority. I remember a blustery day back in March, when he should have.

Mama was home with five squabbling children, trying to get supper ready. George was in Boston, in his sophomore year pre-med at Tufts. Mary and I were helping Junior with his paper route, an undertaking which seemed to be happening more and more. Rita and Larry were especially noisy and getting underfoot, so Mama sent them out to play.

"But, it's cold outside," Larry protested.

"Here, put these on," Mama said, handing him mismatched gloves and a knit hat.

"We'll find something to do," Rita said, nearly pushing him out the door.

"Be sure to stay in the yard," Mama cautioned.

It was Rita who spotted the metal trash barrel in the back yard.

"I've got an idea," she said to Larry, who was standing around shivering.

He looked at her with interest.

"Let's find some matches, and we can start a fire in that barrel to keep warm."

"Okay," he agreed. "I'm cold."

"First, we have to move the barrel closer to the house. When we get the fire going, we can squeeze in between and be warm as toast."

They struggled with the barrel and finally rolled it into place.

"Now, we need some matches," Rita said. They searched the yard but couldn't find any.

"Come on," Rita said, ignoring Mama's admonition, "we'll have to walk around the block." And Larry followed.

It wasn't long before Larry spotted a book of matches. He stooped to pick them up then checked to see how many were inside.

"Now we need some paper," said Rita, holding her hand out for the matches.

Gusty winds whipped stray papers into the air and piled them along the picket fence nearby.

"Quick, Larry, get those papers."

He handed her a small pile.

"We need more," Rita said. "Let's get some of that newspaper Papa uses in the rabbit hutch."

They found a pile near the cellar door, and removed as many as they could carry. When they had stuffed all the papers in the barrel, Rita lit the match and threw it in. They were pleased with how quickly the flames filled the barrel, and stepped in close to feel the heat.

In moving the barrel, Rita never noticed the bottom had rusted out. Now little flames licked the barrel edges and spread to the grass. Rita told Larry to step back. The wind whipped sparks and blackened bits of paper into the air. When flames jumped from the grass to the shingles, Rita became concerned. She said, "We have to tell Mama." Her doll was in a room close by, and she worried it would burn if the house burned.

"I don't want to tell," Larry said. "Mama will punish us."

"I don't care. We have to save my doll."

Rita swung her leg and climbed over the fence. She ran up the steps, and told Mama about the fire.

"Sit here and don't move," Mama cried.

About that time, Junior, Mary and I returned home. We noticed the burning barrel and ran inside.

"Quick, bring a bucket," Mama called out. We filled buckets, empty milk bottles and whatever else we could get our hands on, forming a water brigade from the bathroom to the burning shingles.

The fire was put out before long, but the bottom shingle remained charred. When it seemed safe to leave, we came inside to get the story. We found Rita clutching her doll to her chest, and Larry sitting quietly next to her. They looked like two guilty prisoners awaiting punishment. Mama let them stew.

That afternoon when Papa came home from work he asked, "What's that trash barrel doing in the front yard?" No one answered. He tried again. "Would someone put it in the back yard where it belongs?"

Rita scrambled towards the door. “We’ll do it Papa. C’mon Larry. Let’s go.”

Papa seemed surprised at her enthusiasm. He cocked his head and smiled, as if thinking how obedient his children were. They returned the rusty barrel to the back yard, and came back indoors to await their punishment. But that was the end of it. They never learned if Mama told Papa, or if she kept it quiet. And since we rarely used the front door, Papa didn’t notice the charred shingle.

That was months ago. Now it’s August 1951. Rita’s seventh birthday is in two weeks, and all she wants is a pair of red-buckled shoes. Since the age of three she’s had to wear Girl Scout high-top brown shoes, which attach to the brace. She’s old enough to notice other girls don’t wear these shoes, but too young to understand why she does. She pleads with Mama for red shoes. Mama explains about support and weak muscles and polio.

“If I can’t have red shoes, then I want low shoes for my birthday.”

Mama has such a sad look in her eyes. “When your leg is stronger,” she says, and turns away. Rita stomps in protest, making extra noise with the brace.

Later, I find her sitting in a corner, clinging to her doll, and I sit down beside her. I know she’s disappointed, but I also know Mama is right. A tear rolls down her soft, round cheek.

“Do you think I’ll ever get this brace off?” she asks. I swallow hard and try to think of something to make her feel better.

“Next time Miss Harrington comes for a visit, we’ll ask if there’s something more we can do.”

She rubs her wet eyes with her chubby fist.

“Okay,” she sniffs, and rests her head against my chest. The pressure in my heart has little to do with her resting head. I begin to understand the sad look in Mama’s eyes.

Marines

Hanging on a wall in the parlor is Mama's high school diploma, framed in black. The only other framed picture on that wall is Mama and Papa's wedding picture. The diploma stands out by its very simplicity. Whenever I ask, Mama is only too happy to tell me the story of how she earned her diploma, going to night school while she worked days in the sewing mill. Those two framed pictures sum up Mama's values: family and education.

This year, George is in his third year pre-med at Tuft's in Boston. Mama is proud of George who continues to get good grades. He works summers and has a partial scholarship, and Mama saves everything we earn and most of Papa's pay. We eat lots of bologna sandwiches, and new shoes are an occasion for celebration. I once overheard Mama telling *Tia* Maria that George's expenses were \$1500 a year, and tuition was going up next year. Now, added to that expense, will be my high school tuition.

Junior has offered to quit school and get a job, but Mama insists he finish high school. His paper route brings in some money, but Junior has lost interest in delivering papers. Mama doesn't know it, but he pays Mary and me to do his route while he goofs off with his friends. We meet him at the end of the route, and I smell cigarette smoke on him. As we three walk home, he complains about how boring his life is, and I sense his restlessness.

"Doesn't anyone read the headlines?" he says with disgust. "There's a war going on in Korea, and I'm delivering papers."

I don't want him to go to war, but it's all he talks about. I'm preoccupied with my own worries. In only a few weeks I'll be starting my freshman year at Mt. St. Mary Academy. I'm nervous about not knowing anyone. At least I don't have to worry about my clothes.

All classes wear the same navy blue jumper with pleated skirt. The white blouse has a Peter-Pan collar, and a religious medal is pinned where it meets. Each year is identified by a different pin. Mama was able to find a used jumper and white blouse, so we'll only have to buy one new blouse.

The first weeks of school are a struggle. Most of my classmates have attended Catholic schools and know one another. They don't actually snub me, but

they don't meet me after class, or seek me out at the end of the day. I walk home alone.

I envy the ease with which my classmates approach the sisters. My only experience with nuns was after-school catechism classes for First Communion and Confirmation. Those stern disciplinarians were so different from these nuns, who talk to the girls in such a friendly way.

At home, there are other concerns. Junior has been skipping school, and talks of enlisting. One day after school, I open the kitchen door to an atmosphere of turmoil. Mama's raised voice is saying, "You're too young, and I'm not signing. Besides, you haven't finished school."

"How many times do I have to tell you, I'm through with school." Junior's voice sounds angry and determined. As if to punctuate his comment, he goes out and slams the door behind him, leaving behind a sharp silence.

I lay my books down on the table in the parlor, and go looking for Mary.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Junior wants to enlist in the Marines, and Mama won't sign."

"Why does Mama need to sign?"

"Because he's only seventeen."

Was it only a year ago I played the piano at Junior's eighth grade graduation, and he seemed so happy and carefree? I remembered other times, when he walked me to my piano lessons. And the time we sneaked off to see a movie, when we should have been at my lesson. It was the first movie I had ever seen.

More memories tumbled in front of me. There was the afternoon I was walking to my confirmation class. I noticed my brother hanging out on a street corner with his friends. I smiled at him and he called out, "Hi Doll." His friend, mimicking him, said, "Yeah, hi Doll," not knowing I was Junior's sister. Quick as a dime, Junior turned to his friend and grabbed his collar. "That's my sister, and no one calls her "Doll" but me."

"Okay, okay, I didn't know," his friend apologized.

"Make sure you remember that," Junior said, releasing his friend's collar. I continued on my way, secure in the knowledge that Junior would always look out for me.

Now he wanted to leave us and join the Marines. When George left for college, that was just the beginning. It all felt so unsettling. Like grains of sand sifting to the bottom of an hour glass, our family was changing.

Right to the end, Mama refused to sign Junior's papers. But he only needed one signature, and he eventually convinced Papa. Shortly afterwards, Junior left for training at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. With a borrowed duffle bag to carry his few belongings, he left us smiling with his chipped tooth grin.

For weeks Mama went around the house wearing her headache rag, a whiff of rubbing alcohol wafting in her wake. She said the rag was to hold her brains in. When Papa was home, there was a tight-lipped truce between them, and when they spoke it was in overly polite voices.



Paper Route

Ever since Mary and I were old enough to want money for candy, my brother Junior has had no problem getting cheap labor for his chores. It began a few years ago with our washing diapers for a nickel. Now that I am thirteen and Mary eleven, we help him with his after school paper route. Sometimes, it seems we do most of the work.

“Make sure you lay the paper right by the door and don’t fling it up the stairs!” he orders as we climb the narrow steps to the third floor of the tenement house. Mary delivers papers to one house and I the next, racing to see who will finish first. Meanwhile, Junior lounges on the sidewalk guarding the stack of papers, enjoying his role of supervisor. When we come to the occasional house where only the first floor resident receives the paper, he magnanimously offers to take the paper inside so we can rest.

Actually, Mary and I love the activity of going up and down stairs, and the freedom of walking through neighborhoods away from Mama’s watchful eyes. Delivering forty to fifty papers doesn’t seem like much work. It’s more an escape from the house. Sometimes, we meet kids from school and linger a few minutes to talk. But Junior doesn’t allow too much slack time. He wants his papers delivered quickly so that he can get back in time for some street baseball with his friends.

“Now don’t be wasting time gabbing with your friends. My customers are used to having their papers at their doors before suppertime.”

We quickly say our farewells, grab the papers for the next house, and race to the third floor. Once we pass the houses where our school friends live, the neighborhood subtly changes. Cracked sidewalks sprout weeds, and litter fills the gutters. Mangy dogs bark behind fenced backyards. Mary and I always hurry through this neighborhood, thankful that Junior is nearby.

Sometimes tough looking boys taunt us and mutter wisecracks, until they see Junior. He saunters up to them, says a few words, and they all laugh good-naturedly. Junior makes friends easily. He isn’t afraid of a fight, but somehow it doesn’t ever come to that. After months of delivering papers, we are familiar sights in the neighborhood, and the toughs leave us alone.

Now that Junior has enlisted, the paper route is officially ours. He has never liked school, and hard work even less. The Korean War is just the opportunity he’s been looking for to get away from both. He is determined to find excitement and adventure with the Marines. No Army or Navy for him. Only the Marines will do because “it takes a man to be a Marine” he boasts.

The first afternoon on our own, Mary and I wait for the truck to dump the bundle of papers on our street corner. As soon as the driver drops the pile, Mary and I set to snipping the wire band and dividing the papers. The driver barks at us, "Where's your brother?"

"Oh, he joined the Marines," I say. "It's our paper route now."

"Since, when? You can't handle all those papers by yourself."

"Sure we can. We've been doing it for over a year," says Mary. "See." And she flexes her arm muscles then grips the load of papers under her arms.

From the age of four, Mary has fancied herself to have special strength, like Superman. She says it comes from the curly hair on her arms. I'm not quite as strong. I hoist my stack and we both stagger down the hill towards the first house. The truck driver drives off, laughing and shaking his head.

We finish the route without any problems and return home. When we come inside to clean up Mama says, "Mr. Greene from the *Herald News* called while you were delivering papers. He wants you to stop in to see him tomorrow, before your papers are dropped off."

"Why? What's wrong?" Mary asks.

"I don't know," she says with a puzzled look. "But he said there won't be any delivery until you talk to him. So you better run over right after school tomorrow. Now go wash that newspaper ink from your hands, and get ready for supper." She wipes her hands on her apron, and ambles toward the pantry where pots simmer on the stove.

The next day, I meet Mary at her school and we race to the offices of the *Fall River Herald News*. Having been there a few times with Junior when he was making payments, we remember the way. I ask a thin, bespectacled lady behind a desk where we can find Mr. Greene's office. She points a red fingernail in the direction of a door with an opaque glass panel. It is hazy with grime, and dimly reveals a shadow pacing back and forth. I itch to scrawl "clean me" on the smudgy glass, but suppress the urge.

I knock, and a gruff voice answers, "Come in." Cautiously, we open the door and enter.

"Who are you?" Mr. Greene asks. He sits behind a desk piled with stacks of paper. A smoldering cigar rests on a full ashtray.

"I'm Dolly and this is my sister Mary. Our mom told us you wanted to see us about our paper route."

"Right. Sit down," he says, pointing to a dusty wooden bench. "What's this I hear about you taking it over from your brother?"

"We've been helping him for years," I say. "Now he's a Marine."

“So I heard. You girls are too small to carry all those papers. It’s one thing to help out, but another to handle a route by yourselves.” He reaches down for his cigar, taps some ash then lets the cigar rest in the ashtray.

“What makes you think two young girls can manage?” His condescending attitude makes us sit a little taller on the hard bench.

“We know all the families who take the *Herald*, we collect every Saturday and we’ve come here with our brother to make payments,” I say. “We’re fast and reliable and our customers are very satisfied.”

I take a deep breath and then boldly ask, “Did someone complain?”

“Nobody complained. I just don’t think girls can do the job that boys can.”

He stands up and rubs his chin. We sit there, trying to think of something to say that will convince him. Just then Mary flexes her arm muscles and says, “See how strong I am?” Mr. Greene almost chokes. He clears his throat and says, “All right. I’m going to give you a chance. But if I hear of any problems, I’m taking the route away from you and giving it to some deserving boy.” He pauses. “Now go deliver your papers. They’re sitting on your corner, and your customers are waiting.”

“Thank you” we murmur in unison. He opens his office door, and we step outside breathing in the fresh air. Mary and I grin at one another and then we race home with the good news. We are the first girls to have our own paper route. We don’t doubt for a minute that we can handle the job.

When we reach our corner, we see the stack of newspapers tied up and waiting. Just as we have done so many times before, we snip the wire and divide the bulky pile. But today there is an extra bounce in our steps and smiles on our faces. We hurry to make up for the time lost in Mr. Greene’s office. We struggle with the heavy Thursday paper which has all the weekend sales. Once we get through the first two or three houses, the stack will be a lot more manageable.

The weeks pass uneventfully. Mama says we are even better than Junior at collecting from our customers. She especially appreciates the extra tips. What she doesn’t know is that the tips are about the same. Junior pocketed some of those dimes and nickels, but Mary and I proudly hand them all to Mama. Sometimes we think it’s unfair that we don’t get to keep any for ourselves, but that’s how it is in our family. We all contribute to the pot.

While Mary and I enjoy delivering papers, we don’t always like collecting. Some people are friendly and always ready with the correct change and a tip.

Others won't answer the door even though we hear them moving around inside. That means we have to come back. Some of the entryways are creepy with dust balls and darting cats. In summer it's hot climbing to the third floor. No one has air conditioning, and the darkened hallways are stuffy.

One quiet old man, Mr. Kirby, props open his door for the breeze. He keeps a small fan on the table while he watches his grainy black and white television. We don't have television at home, so we like to linger by his open door. Mary and I take turns collecting from him so that we can watch shows.

Even with the door ajar, he makes me knock several times. I see him sitting in his overstuffed chair, his soft body spilling over the sides. When he finally gets up, he hitches up his pants and feels in his pockets for change. His watery gaze makes me feel uncomfortable, though he never says anything other than, "There you go, forty-two cents for the paper and three cents for you." Then he presses the sweaty coins into my open palm.

"Thank you," I say and hurry down the steps, wiping my hands on my dress. Mary and I meet on the sidewalk and move on to the next set of tenement houses.

The following week it is Mary's turn to call on Mr. Kirby. I collect from the three-flat across the street then wait a few minutes. When she isn't there, I walk on to the next house then hurry back. I approach the house and look up the narrow stairway just as Mary flies down the steps. Her eyes are dark and fierce, and her dress is wrinkled.

"What's the matter with your dress?" I ask. She looks down and hastily smooths it, but doesn't say anything.

"What took you so long? I already collected from the next house."

She doesn't answer but walks on ahead with a determined step. When we get home, we hand Mama the money. Finally, Mary speaks.

"From now on, I don't deliver or collect from Mr. Kirby."

I think Mama will be mad, because we never tell her what we will or won't do. But Mama gives Mary a long, searching look and says, "Okay, Dolly can do that house."

Nothing more is said about Mr. Kirby. In fact, I never see him after that because he keeps his door closed. On Saturday mornings the forty-two cents are in an envelope lying on the sash under his closed door. There is no tip inside.

Mama questions me every week about the customers, and asks if there are any problems, not mentioning Mr. Kirby in particular. I tell her the truth, that there are none, except for those late paying customers who never seem to have their money ready.

“I think it’s time that Larry learns the paper route,” Mama announces a few weeks later, as she counts out the quarters, nickels and pennies.

“You can put your papers in his wagon and he can pull it along for you.” I am surprised because Larry is only seven years old. But the following week, Larry begins to accompany us. With three of us delivering papers, there is a little extra time for visiting with our school friends. We never stay too long because Mama always seems to know how long the route should take, and she questions us if we tarry.

Eventually, we pass the paper route on to Larry. He sometimes takes Rita along for company. Rita, who is eight, sits on the papers in the wagon while Larry delivers them inside the tenement houses. Mama is adamant that Rita never go inside the houses. Her explanation is that Rita’s leg was weakened from polio and the stairs would be too much for her.

The full story of what happened to Mary that day wouldn’t unfold for fifty years. It is a late summer afternoon, and I have traveled from my home in Minnesota to visit Mary in Massachusetts. Shadows dapple patterns on our outstretched legs, as she and I relax in her screened porch, sharing family stories. For the first time, she speaks of that Saturday morning with Mr. Kirby. As she nears the end of her story, a bubble of laughter escapes, and she flexes her arm muscle in that old, familiar way.

“There was no way that dirty old man was going to get me to sit on his lap. I stomped on his foot and gave him a hard poke in his soft belly then ran like lightning.”

I laugh with her, but inside I feel sad for that innocent little girl, and I am humbled by her courage. I slide my feet off the lounge chair, get up and give her a big hug. She hugs me back, and breathes out a long, satisfied sigh.

Tia Irene

Mary and I sang with Papa in the church choir this morning, and Papa says we need some fortification before we walk home. He laughs when he says fortification, a word he probably absorbed from one of the many western paperbacks he reads. He strides in the direction of *Tia Irene's* house, and we happily follow. *Tia* conveniently lives one block from the church, in a second floor apartment over a grocery store. The store is closed on Sundays, and all is quiet as we climb the outside stairs to her kitchen door.

"Come in, come in," my aunt cries as she answers our knock and opens the door. She greets us with a welcoming smile then covers her mouth with her hand because she's sensitive about her missing teeth.

"I was hoping you'd stop by after church," she says to the three of us. "Bobby's at the bakery getting donuts." She lowers her voice and says with concern, "I needed an excuse to get him away from playing baseball with those boys in the park."

Cousin Bobby has rheumatic heart and my aunt worries when he's too active.

"Irene, you can't stop that boy from having fun," Papa says.

"I know, but he forgets his bad heart and plays too hard." *Tia's* face crinkles and her mouth puckers. She reminds me of a dried apple-doll.

"But, you're right. I can't stop him from being a boy." She pauses then says, "And how's your boy doing?"

My ears perk up. Even though Junior's name isn't mentioned, we all know *Tia* is asking about him.

"We don't hear much while he's in Boot Camp. I imagine by the end of the day he's too tired to think."

Tia makes a sympathetic hm-m-m sound and nods her head in agreement.

"But," Papa continues, "he'll be coming home for a visit when his training is completed. Then we'll see if the Marines have made a man out of my boy."

With brisk movements, *Tia* swipes at the crumbs on the table then brushes her hands on her apron.

"Sit, sit," she tells us, dragging kitchen chairs to the table. "Make yourselves comfortable." She takes Papa's coat and yells for Evelyn, her younger daughter.

"Evelyn, take your uncle's coat and hang it in the closet."

Evelyn is a few years older than I am and looks it. She wears bright red lipstick and rouge. She enters the kitchen, blowing on her nails, making sure we notice.

“Hi Uncle Joe” she gushes. “The choir must have sounded pretty good this morning, with all the Silva’s singing.”

Before he can comment, she says, “I just finished painting my nails, but I’ll be careful with your coat.”

I look with envy at her red nails. Mama won’t allow me to wear make-up until I’m sixteen, which is eighteen months away. Evelyn tosses her dark hair, and frowns at her mother.

“Ma,” she says in her nasal voice, “your nylons are bagging again.”

She blows her nails one last time, and when she’s satisfied they are dry, takes Papa’s coat. She sashays towards the bedroom, his coat draped over her arm.

Tia bends over and with a quick twist of her fingers, pulls and knots her nylons below her knobby knees.

In his white shirt and silver blue tie, Papa graces any table. He sits now in the nearest chair, and re-positions the angle of his left hand until it rests in his lap. The vinyl and leather prosthesis fills his shirt sleeve, but isn’t of much practical use. Fortunately, with donuts and coffee, there will be no need for cutting up food.

Papa smiles at *Tia* and says, “Something sure smells good.”

“That’s the *cauldene*,” *Tia* beams.

Cauldene is a Portuguese kale soup and *Tia* makes it rich with lots of meat as well as potatoes, kale and kidney beans. It’s a family favorite. Her matchstick legs always on the move, *Tia* stirs the pot of soup on the stove, and checks the perking coffee.

“Coffee is nearly ready,” she says, “and Bobby should be here soon.”

Uncle Manny shuffles in from the bedroom, snapping his suspenders in place and blinking his eyes. “What’s all this noise?”

He works the night shift as a fireman in the factory. Not the kind of fireman who puts out fires in burning buildings, but a stoker of fires in furnaces. He saunters to a corner of the room, and plops down in a chair out of the way.

“Look who stopped by for coffee,” *Tia* says, grinning her toothless smile. Her sparkly eyes admire our Sunday dresses, which she recognizes as her daughters’ hand-me-downs. She clasps her hands together and says, “Don’t the girls look nice. Which reminds me ...” and she calls out to her other daughter, Eileen.

“Where’s that bag of clothes we put together for your cousins?”

Eileen is two years older than Evelyn but more docile. “Ma, I don’t remember,” she says distractedly. She’s watching television and doesn’t want to be interrupted.

“Look in that box out on the porch,” *Tia* Irene says with irritation in her voice. “We just sorted those clothes yesterday. Do I have to remember everything?”

Eileen reluctantly leaves her television show, and glides sheepishly past us to the porch. We have to move our chairs because the kitchen is small, and we’re blocking the doorway.

Tia Irene returns to the stove where the pot of soup simmers. She raises the lid, dips in a wooden spoon, puckers her mouth and takes a sip.

“Um-m-m, this tastes good if I say so myself. Joe, it’s almost ready. Can you and the girls stay for some *cauldene*?”

“No, but thank you very much.” Papa responds graciously. “You know Agnes is alone with the young ones, and she’ll be waiting for the girls to come home to give her a hand. We’ll just have the donuts and coffee.” Mary and I inch closer to the table in anticipation.

As if on cue, Bobby returns carrying two grease-stained bags bursting with freshly baked donuts. He’s the youngest in this family and the only boy. Everyone knows *Tia* favors him, and worries about him. He looks healthy but he does get out of breath easily.

If *Tia* calls him in and tells him he should stop playing so hard, he grins and asks mischievously, “Do you want to make a sissy out of me?” Then he gives her a hug and goes back to his friends. *Tia* just shrugs and gives a look as if to ask, “What more can I do? He’s a boy.” But today he decides to stay and visit with us. We scrape our chairs away from the doorway to let him pass.

“Hello Uncle Joe” he greets Papa. He carefully drops the bags of donuts on the table then ruffles Mary’s hair and mine.

“Hi, girls. How was choir today?” he asks affably, pulling up a chair to the table. *Tia* smiles gratefully when she sees he’s decided to stay. She brings out coffee cups with matching plates from the cupboard.

“Eileen, get the napkins” she calls over her shoulder to my cousin who comes in carrying the bag of clothes. Then she turns to us and says, “I want you girls to notice that your auntie Irene knows how to set a proper table.”

Uncle Manny, who hasn’t moved from his corner, puffs on his cigar, taking in the scene, but doesn’t say a word. He worked last night and isn’t quite awake. He wears a rumpled plaid flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up at the wrists. His bushy eyebrows hover over dark eyes that squint from his cigar smoke. From the

safety of his snug spot in the corner, he assesses the bustle of activity and decides to stay put.

Tia Irene brings over the pot of coffee to fill Papa's cup. She nearly trips on the bag of clothes Eileen foolishly left in the middle of the floor, when she went for the napkins.

"Eileen, where are your brains?" she yells, barely holding on to the pot.

"I nearly spilled hot coffee on your Uncle Joe. Now put this bag out of the way, then find a chair and come sit with us. And see if you can get Evelyn away from her fashion magazines."

She bustles to our side of the table and pours coffee for us. Papa moves his chair aside, and invites Uncle Manny to join us. Uncle Manny stands up, and bends over to carry his chair. He doesn't get very far when he starts coughing and hacking up phlegm. He coughs so hard that tears come to his eyes, but he signals with his hand that he is okay. He sits down again and hunches forward in his chair. I notice tobacco juice dribbling from the corner of his mouth. *Tia* Irene must be used to uncle Manny's coughing spells because she only gives him a quick glance. Then she brings milk and sugar to the table and sits down with us.

Everyone talks at once, and I melt in all the happy chaos of scraping chairs, arms reaching for donuts and the loving closeness of family. I feel a pang of guilt as I think of Mama and how she's missing all this, stuck at home with the young ones. *Tia* Irene is her sister, yet they hardly ever get together. We're lucky we sing in the choir with Papa, and that he likes to stop and visit.

Even though *Tia* talks in a loud voice and yells a lot, being in her kitchen is like being safely tucked under the covers with a howling wind outside, sort of overwhelmed and safe at the same time. I bite down into the cream filled donut, and sip my sweetened coffee which is half milk. That's how we like our coffee. The sugary flavors swirl around my tongue, and I'd like to sit in this cozy kitchen all morning. I'm startled from my sugar-induced reverie by a hissing, spitting sound coming from the stove. *Tia* Irene jumps up from the table and in her haste, nearly tips her chair over.

"Oh my goodness," she exclaims. "I'm so busy talking I forgot the *cauldene*." She yelps as she removes the hot lid then drops it with a clang to the floor. Her burned fingers fly to her mouth where she licks them soothingly with her tongue. With her other hand she lowers the gas flame under the pot then stirs the soup again. The spicy smells drifting towards us are wonderful, but it really wouldn't be fair to Mama to stay much longer. We finish our coffee and donuts, and Papa says we had better be going. Evelyn brings Papa his coat, and *Tia* Irene stuffs a bag of donuts into Papa's hand.

“You take these to Agnes and tell her to stop by after church. She can manage the stairs if she takes it easy.” We say our good-byes and uncle Manny pats our behinds when we scoot past him. “Thank you *Tia* Irene,” Mary and I chorus. “The donuts were delicious,” I say.

“Come again, anytime” she says sincerely. She holds both our faces in her hands, as if studying them. With a gentle touch she squeezes our cheeks. Her warm hands have the sharp smell of garlic and onions mixed with sugar from the donuts. She stands in the open doorway as we make our way down the steps.

We are half way down when she shouts, “Wait, you forgot the clothes.”

Mary and I dash up the steps to get the bag that we will tear into as soon as we get home. I’m always hopeful there will be something special like the purple velvet dress. When I wore that dress, I preened.

I don’t expect anything quite so enchanting today, but then you can never predict what magic waits in the bag. It’s not that our cousins are richer than we are, but they are a family of three children and we have nine. I think that’s why *Tia* is always glad when we stop by, so that she can feed us.

She gives us so much more than food. Sunbeams of love radiate from her soft brown eyes straight into our hearts, and fill us with tenderness. It doesn’t matter that her mouth is sunken where her teeth are missing, or that she shouts. Papa said she got in the habit of yelling because Uncle Manny is deaf from the noisy boilers at work. She is good and kind and generous, and our hearts overflow with love for this dear aunt who creates comfort out of pandemonium.

I carry the bag down the steps to the street where Papa waits. At the top of the stairs, *Tia* bends over to tighten the knot on her nylons. She raises her head and smiles her toothless smile. Then she remembers, covers her mouth with one hand, and with the other waves until we are out of sight.

Junior's Visit

At Mount St. Mary Academy, affectionately called "The Mount," I've finally made a friend, Sheila Tuttle. She's outgoing with everyone, and often stays behind at the end of the day to chat with some of the girls from St. Peter and Paul. Today she catches up with me.

"Hi. My grandmother says you pass our house on your way to school, and I wondered if we could walk together."

"Sure," I answer with a huge smile.

"I'm from St. Louis School and the only one to come to the Mount," Sheila says. "What about you?"

"I'm the only one from McDonough School."

"I thought so. It's not easy breaking into the cliques, is it?" she says.

I stop dead in my tracks and look at her with surprise?

"I know what you're thinking. You see me talking to the girls so you think I belong, don't you?"

"You do seem to know a lot of them."

"It only looks that way," she says. "I'm just on the fringes, like you."

"Well, we'll form our own group," I say with spirit, and hope I haven't been too forward. It feels good to have a friend to talk to about things.

When we reach Sheila's house, I find out she lives on Middle Street, halfway between school and my house. She tells me she lives on the third floor, her aunt on the first, and her grandma on the second. We say good-bye, and I make a silent wish that we can walk together often. I take the shortcut through South Park and hurry home to tell Mary my good news.

Everyone is gathered around someone in uniform when I open the kitchen door. It's my brother Junior. I leap in excitement, forgetting all about my news. For weeks we've been anticipating his visit from Boot Camp. Much as I miss him, it's surprising how quickly I've adapted to his being away. I don't have as many shirts to iron, and there's more room around the kitchen table. But I'm happy to see him now. I wonder if he'll be different.

The circle opens and Junior stands tall in his polished boots, looking like a stranger. His curly brown hair has been replaced by a military buzz cut. It's clipped so close, his head looks like one of our plucked chickens. He seems thinner, but somehow fit, like his muscles have been doing hard work.

“Well, are you just gonna’ stare at me?” Junior asks, twisting his cap around and around in his hands. “Aren’t you gonna’ say “hi” and tell me how dull it’s been here without me?”

Part of me wants to hug him, but that’s not our way. I move close and touch his sleeve instead. The fabric feels starched and formal. I run my fingers over his bristly haircut.

“Put your cap on,” I say.

Junior adjusts his jaunty cap, until he gets the angle just right. Then he gives me a crisp salute and grins. I look for the front tooth that he chipped playing baseball, only it’s not chipped any more. He notices me gaping and says, “That’s been fixed. Now I’m perfect.”

We both laugh and the tension is broken. Even with stiff creases in his clothes, and his wavy hair cut off, he’s still our brother. Mama, who can’t seem to take her eyes off him says, “Sit down Junior. I have some *cauldene* from yesterday. I’ll heat it up.”

Junior sits at the table and we watch him eat.

“Tell us about Boot Camp,” Mary says.

Between sips of hot soup he tells us of getting up at dawn, making his bed until he can spin a quarter on it, endless marches and spit shoe-shines.

“You mean you actually get up early every morning, and make your own bed?” I ask with sarcasm?

Junior laughs. “Very funny,” he says. “Don’t forget. I’m a Marine now.”

“And it takes a man to be a Marine,” Mary and I banter as if on cue. We all laugh. It feels good to know our brother hasn’t changed.

Mama comes in with more soup but Junior says, “The *cauldene* was delicious Ma, but I gotta’ go. There are some friends I need to see.”

No, he hasn’t changed at all, I’m thinking. He opens the kitchen door, tips his cap and says, “Don’t worry. I’ll be back for supper,” and closes the door.

We didn’t see much of Junior that visit. Seems he had a girlfriend we didn’t know about.

Ordinary Shoes

Summer of '52 arrives and I have survived my first year at Mount St. Mary Academy. My heavy textbooks have been put away in the attic for Mary to use in two years, and I've replaced my navy blue uniform with shorts and sandals. It is my sandals which trigger Rita's campaign to get out of high lace-up shoes and into ordinary low shoes. I have promised to help.

All winter long and into spring, Rita and I ride to Union Hospital on Saturday mornings for her physical therapy sessions. Joe Billy, the driver provided by the March of Dimes, takes us in his cab. He cracks jokes on the trip and makes us laugh. When Joe Billy unwraps his cigar, he gives Rita the gold band as a pretend ring for her finger. That's all it takes for an eight-year old to feel special.

We look forward to our Saturday adventures, even though it means painful stretching exercises for Rita. For the duration of the ride, Joe Billy succeeds in making her forget. It is when he drops us off at the front door of the hospital that Rita remembers.

"My leg is getting stronger, isn't it?" she asks me, preparing herself for the therapy session.

"Absolutely," I answer and take her hand.

We enter the hospital and locate the physical therapy department.

"Come with me," the nurse calls, and we follow her to a room with a table next to a hot whirlpool. She easily lifts Rita onto the table, removes the strap and brace from her right leg and tests the water.

"Water is perfect," she says to Rita. "Drop your foot slowly into the bubbles." Rita does as instructed. After a few minutes I see Rita's whole body relax. Her shoulders slump and she gets a glazed look on her face.

"I'll leave the two of you here for a little while, and then Miss Monroe will come in to do your exercises," she says, and sets a timer. Rita smiles at me. Miss Monroe is her favorite nurse.

As soon as she's gone I dip my fingers into the hot, bubbling water, and understand why Rita has this dreamy look on her face. The heat works its magic as it loosens the tense muscles and prepares them. At home I use baby oil to massage the calf and foot before the stretches.

The timer goes off. Within minutes, Miss Monroe walks in, all smiles in her crisp white uniform.

"Hello Rita," she says, "how's my favorite patient today?" Rita answers with her irrepressible giggle.

“And how are you?” she says to me, while she carefully removes Rita’s foot from the water and towels it dry.

“I’m fine,” I answer, and watch how she gently strokes the calf muscles, and begins the slow stretches. Rita hardly grimaces, and I think the heat of the whirlpool must work better than my rubbing oil. When I tell Miss Monroe that we don’t have a whirlpool at home, she smiles.

“Most people don’t. That’s why Rita comes to the hospital. But what you are doing at home is so important. Every week I see improvement.”

I feel better hearing that.

“In fact,” she continues, “I think you can start riding the bus for these visits. It picks you up in front of our door and takes you to a transfer bus. The second bus drops you off two blocks from your home, and it will be good for Rita to walk. She’ll rest on the bus ride and be ready to stretch her legs at that point. I’ll talk to your mother about it.”

The following Saturday, Mama accompanies us on the bus to the hospital. It is a new adventure, but we miss Joe Billy and his jokes. Mama explains where we wait for the bus, and where to make the transfer. At the hospital, Mama and Miss Monroe discuss Rita’s therapy.

“You explain it all to Dolly as you go along,” she says to Miss Monroe. “She’s the one doing the exercises at home.”

“My, my,” Miss Monroe says, taking a good look at me. “What a fine nurse you will make some day.”

I feel puffed up with pride. Ever since Miss Harrington has been making well-baby visits to our home, I’ve wanted to be a nurse. If Miss Monroe believes in me too, then chances are it will happen.

Once the session is over, we reverse the process with the busses. Mama questions me, making sure I understand. She is a good teacher, and I feel confident I can get us to the hospital next week.

After weeks of visits, Rita and I have a routine. One breezy summer day, as we wait for the bus outside the hospital entrance, I decide to change the routine.

“Rita,” I say, “remember Miss Monroe said you should walk more to strengthen your leg?”

She looks at me with such trust in her bright eyes. “Uh- huh,” she answers.

“Well, what do you think about skipping this bus, and walking the few blocks to the transfer bus.”

“Why do we want to do that?” she asks, her nose and eyes crinkled in puzzlement.

“If you’re not too tired after therapy, we could walk and save the nickel fare. You could rest on the transfer bus, and when it lets us off on Broadway, we could buy candy at the corner store.”

Candy was the magic word. Rita’s puzzled face turned into a huge smile. I glanced over my shoulder before starting out to make certain no one noticed our change in routine

It was a longer walk than I realized. Rita dragged her foot, but she never complained. I was relieved when we arrived at the corner. In minutes the bus arrived, and we took our seats. By the time we reached our destination, Rita was rested and excited about the candy.

We dashed to the store, and bought all the treats we could with a nickel. Rita chose pink, yellow and chocolate taffy Kits, and I bought red wax lips and pretend cigarettes. I moistened the red tip and applied it like lipstick. It made me feel daring. I decided I didn’t like the sticky feel, and licked it off. Then I put on the thick red wax lips, and batted my eyelashes. Rita giggled in delight.

After eating our treats we walked up the last hill, tired but very pleased with ourselves. Of course, we told no one. This became our weekly pattern unless the weather was bad. At times I had a twinge of guilt, trying to understand my true motives. I knew Rita hated the high shoes and would do anything to get rid of them. She made that clear by scuffing them any chance she got. But she trusted me to do what was best for her. Was I really helping her to strengthen her leg by having her walk, or was I just interested in the candy?

By the end of summer I could see definite improvement in Rita’s walk, and my conscience was eased. She walked to the bus stop with a steady gait, and no longer dragged her foot. Her improvement was also observed by Miss Monroe.

“I understand you want low shoes for school,” Miss Monroe said one Saturday after therapy session, as she strapped on the leather brace.

I caught Rita’s eye and saw hope flash. She sat perfectly still. Miss Monroe put her hands on Rita’s shoulders.

“You’ve been working very hard, haven’t you?” she asked, looking right into Rita’s eyes.

Rita held her gaze and nodded her head, yes.

“And you’ve been walking more, haven’t you?”

The words bubbled out of Rita’s mouth. “I don’t drag my foot any more. And we walk all the way to the transfer bus,” she said.

“I thought so,” Miss Monroe said. “I’ve watched out the window and wondered. Were you short on bus fare?”

“No,” I answered sheepishly.

“We buy candy with the nickel,” Rita blurted in her innocence.

“I see.” Miss Monroe said and looked at me. I felt so guilty I dropped my eyes.

She paused, as if giving a lot of thought to what she said next.

“Maybe you could give those nickels to your mother. She’s going to need them when she buys Rita a new pair of shoes.”

“You mean ...,” I said with hope in my voice.

“I mean your sister is ready for ordinary shoes.”

It took a few minutes for her comment to sink in. Rita jumped down from the table and did a clumsy little dance, pigtails flying and brown eyes sparkling. Miss Monroe smiled, and folded her hands across her chest.

“Of course,” she said, “there will be some rules about the new shoes, and how long you wear them each day, but I’ll discuss that with your mother. Now off you go. And don’t overdo it.”

I felt such relief that I hadn’t harmed my sister with the extra walking. When I explained to Rita we would have to give Mama the nickel and wouldn’t be able to buy any more candy, she said, “That’s okay. I was getting sick of candy anyway.”

I still had to explain all those spent nickels to Mama, but I would face that later. For now, my heart felt light. Rita and I walked to the bus, swinging our hands together.

Sophomore

Smack in the center of my Peter-Pan collar hangs the medal of the Blessed Virgin, which identifies me as a sophomore at Mount Saint Mary Academy. Last year I learned that each day begins with morning prayers, and we're expected to attend Chapel on Feast Days and other special occasions. I've made tentative inroads into the rarified circle of friends and should feel more confident, but it's like starting freshman year all over again. As I walk up the hill I look for Sheila, and though we haven't planned it, she steps out her front door as I pass by.

"Hi Dolly. We're sophomores," she says with enthusiasm. "Isn't it great that we know the ropes now?"



When Sheila smiles, you can't help notice her white teeth, shiny black hair and bright blue eyes with a hint of violet. She is what I will later learn is a true Irish beauty, but it is her friendliness that draws me, and makes me glad that she's my friend. She looks like she's ready to tackle the world, and I feel I'm right there with her. Until she asks her question. "Did you see any of the girls over the summer?" As none of the Mount girls live in my neighborhood, this is not likely. "No, did you?" All at once I feel anxious.

Sheila "Not very often. I did walk to Monica's house once or twice and Carol D. was there. But it's a long walk and my mom didn't like me out alone at night.

"You're lucky your mom allows you to stay out after dark. As soon as it's dusk, my mom calls us in, like chickens to the coop."

Sheila laughs. I'm quiet, still thinking of her walking home from Monica's.

"Weren't you afraid?" I ask.

"I did look over my shoulder every now and then, but I wasn't really afraid."

We reach the school yard. Sheila spots Monica and calls out, "Hi Monica." Monica is talking to her Saint Peter and Paul friends, but she waves us over. Sheila slides her arm through mine and says, "Come on before we have to go in."

I step lively towards the group. Maybe sophomore year will be easier.

One sunny October morning, crisp and crackling with fallen leaves, I cross South Park to meet Sheila. I'm disappointed when I don't see her, shuffle my heavy books close to my chest and prepare to tackle the hill. Suddenly, I hear her calling.

"Dolly, wait up, I have something to ask you," she shouts with glee.

I break my sturdy stride and gladly wait.

"Boy, you were really trudging along. I didn't think I'd catch up to you," she says, gasping for breath.

When I see the friendliness in Sheila's dancing eyes, I realize how much I count on our daily walks to school. She is so welcoming, I feel my confidence soar.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I'm so excited," she says. "I was talking to my mom before she left for school, and she finally agreed to let me have a boy-girl Halloween party. I can't wait to invite everyone. Do you think your mom will let you come?"

I'm at a loss for words just thinking of asking Mama. I'll be fifteen in another month, but I know how strict Mama is. This past summer, when my friend Claudette from Junior High asked me to go to the movies, Mama said no. "You'll have plenty of time for that later." When I persisted she said, "Fourteen is too young for movies. They put bad ideas into your head." She doesn't know about the time I was eleven and Junior took me to a movie, when I was supposed to be at my piano lesson. But that's the only movie I've ever seen.

It doesn't help to badger Mama once she makes up her mind. She's made it clear there's to be no lipstick or dates until I'm sixteen. Being the first girl in a family comes with a high price. All this runs through my mind as I think about Sheila's question.

"I don't know what my mom will say," I answer, "but I'll ask her and let you know."

That afternoon I arrive home with the Halloween party question spinning in my head, and a strategy for when to approach Mama. Before I open the kitchen door, I hear the raised voices of Mama and Papa squabbling, and my prepared speech goes out of my head. I turn the knob and open the door slowly. No one notices me.

"You're going to make a sissy out of him with all those curls," Papa says angrily, holding a barber's scissors in his hand.

"And I told you he's too young for a boy's haircut," Mama answers back, pressing Paul to her side, and running her fingers through his ringlets.

Paul will be three next month, his birthday being the day after mine, but he's Mama's baby. Mama presses her lips in a thin line. Paul's startled brown eyes fill with tears. It feels as if I'm entering an arena of unresolved differences. For my own peace of mind, I need to think of this heated argument as a dispute, but anyone seeing Papa's clenched hand knows differently. This isn't the first time Papa has threatened to cut Paul's curls and I agree it's time, but know better than to speak out. The truth is, Paul is cute with his mass of black curls, and we all tend to baby him.

Now I open the door all the way, and drop my books noisily on the nearest chair.

"Hi everybody," I say, hoping to diffuse the tension. I decide this is probably not the best time to approach Mama about a boy-girl party, even though I don't intend to tell her about the boy part.

Halloween Party

In true Mama fashion, she keeps me on tenterhooks with her answer. I haven't been completely truthful about boys being at the party, or the fact that it is a party. What I actually say is that Sheila and her mother have invited me for the evening.

I do tell Mama that Sheila has an older brother, Eric, but I play it down. I say he has white mice as pets, and I think it is disgusting. It's true he keeps white mice in a cage at the top of the stairs, but I hardly think he's disgusting. He's tall, blonde and friendly in a quiet way, so different from the Portuguese friends of my brother Junior, who are short, dark and full of mischief. Sheila also has an older sister, Sylvia, too sophisticated for us. Whenever I visit, she keeps to her room. I see her through the partially open door, her silky blonde hair falling over her face, paging through magazines.

Sheila's mom is a widow and the only working mom I know. Though Sheila may not agree, I think it's glamorous to have a mom who dresses up in high heels and goes off to work each day. Last year, after I casually mentioned Mrs. Tuttle was a school teacher, Mama eased up and allowed me to visit more often. Now when I ask to go to Sheila's, Mama says with suffering patience, "Give them an inch and they'll take a mile."

I'm walking a fine line, and the evening of the party is creeping closer. Sheila says not to worry. Her apartment is small and she has to limit the number who attend, but she'll keep a spot open for me.

At last Mama gives her permission, as long as I am home by 9:00 o'clock. Inwardly I chafe at the restriction, but outwardly I thank her. Fortunately, it's not a costume party, so I can wear rolled up jeans and my brother's shirt. As I'm about to leave, Mama looks askance at my choice of clothes, but says nothing. I button my jacket and quickly leave.

This is my first party and I have no idea what to expect as I knock on the door. Mrs. Tuttle greets me, and tells me to go into the den off the kitchen. The small room is transformed. Paper spiders, creepy bats and filmy webs hang from the ceiling. The lights are dimmed, but I see boys and girls sitting in a circle on the floor in the midst of a game.

Sheila gets up, closes the door behind me and says, "I'm so glad you could come. Take a place on the floor, we're playing spin-the-bottle." I recognize Monica and Glynnie, and Anthony who lives in my neighborhood. Sheila introduces me to the others, including the boy she is sweet on. We are eight in all.

When my turn comes to spin the bottle, I hope it will land on an empty space, but it lands right in front of Anthony. He lumbers over, and I turn my head quickly so that his kiss lands on the side of my face. The surprise of that first kiss is not the thrill I was expecting. In fact it's a slobbering kiss and kind of repulsive, but I laugh along with everyone else, and pass the bottle. I store the moment to think about later on my walk home.

"Okay, it's time to play post office now," Sheila announces. In this game, a girl goes behind the closet door, and a boy is chosen to follow after her. I hear scuffling then giggles before they come out together. Monica asks, "Did you stamp it?" and there's general laughter. I don't know what the laughter is about or what is stamped, and hope I won't get asked behind the door.

I'm saved by Sheila's mom who totters in with a pan filled to the brim with sloshing water, balanced on one knee as she opens the door.

"I thought it was time for apple bobbing," Mrs. Tuttle says, discreetly scanning the room and turning on a lamp. There are a few groans of disappointment but we find a space to set the pan down. Before Mrs. Tuttle leaves, I quietly ask her the time, and realize I must leave soon. We take turns trying to sink our teeth into an apple without getting too wet. This is one game I'm good at because I have strong teeth, and I get the prize for the first apple. Shortly afterwards, I say my good-byes. I eat my prize apple as soon as I'm outdoors.

My head is filled with thoughts of the party as I travel the familiar roads. It was exciting being with boys, yet scary. I envied the ease of the other girls. They seemed to know what to expect, while I felt as if I were playing a part. I munch the apple, remembering the crunch of that winning bite and the fun of the evening.

The shortest way home is through South Park, but it is safer on the brightly lit streets. Besides, I need the extra time to come up with a story for Mama who will be waiting up. Shall I tell her Sheila had some girls over and we bobbed for apples? I kick the dried leaves in the curbs, and they swirl in front of me like my thoughts. I must calm down and think.

The following morning, when Mary and I walk to church, I unleash my enthusiasm and give her the unedited version of the party.

"What did you tell Mama?" she asks.

"I said Monica and Glynnie were over and we talked about school. Mrs. Tuttle made cookies and cocoa, and then we bobbed for apples because it was Halloween."

"No mention of thick-lips Anthony, huh?" she teases.

I swing out to slap her but she's too quick for me. I run after her and we have a good laugh. I feel normal again.

On Monday, when Sheila and I arrive at school, our friends call us over. I am now part of the group. More parties are planned but I know I won't be attending. My classmates live too far away, and I can't keep telling Mama half-truths.

I feel more secure in my small circle of friends. And then something happens to collapse my confidence. One day as I'm changing out of my blue gym shirt and bloomers, I spot a note in my locker. At first I think it's an invitation, but soon realize it's nothing of the kind. The note is brief and unsigned. "You need to do something about your b.o." I haven't any idea what those letters mean but I get a sinking feeling. After school, as Sheila and I walk home, I show her the note.

"Oh, how nasty," she says.

"What?"

"Well, maybe it's not so mean, but the person should have told you kindly and in person."

"Told me what?" I ask, feeling very queasy inside. "What do those letters mean?"

"Body odor," Sheila says and drops her eyes.

"Oh, I answer in a small voice," and feel the heat of embarrassment flame my cheeks.

"It's a common problem because we don't have showers at school," Sheila says kindly, "and some of us perspire more than others. You always put your heart and soul into gym. It's no wonder you sweat more."

"Well, how do you take care of it?" I ask.

"I keep deodorant in my locker and reapply it after gym."

"Oh, deodorant," I say crestfallen. "My mom won't let us use deodorant. She says it blocks your pores."

"Will she let you use baby powder? If you use a damp paper towel or keep a washcloth in your locker, you can freshen up after gym and sprinkle on the baby powder."

"How do you know these things?" I ask.

"That's one thing older sisters are good for," she says laughing. And I suddenly feel so much better. She takes the burden of my ignorance and makes light of it without making me feel stupid. She knows I don't have older sisters, and brothers are no help in situations like this.

When we arrive at Sheila's house, we say our good-byes and I continue my walk home. I shift the weight of my books in my arms to even the load. Somewhere

on that walk home, I realize that all learning isn't contained in books. Papa, who never went beyond the sixth grade, once said his school was the school of hard knocks. I begin to understand what he meant. The note in my locker was a hard knock to my feelings, but my friend knew how to soften the blow.

Carol Ann

On the last day of school, Sheila and I make plans to play tennis in the park during summer vacation. Her Uncle Bill has two wooden racquets we can use. He says they're collecting dust in her Grandma's closet and we're welcome to them.

However, my summer plans come to a screeching halt when Mama gives birth to what will be her last baby, on June eighth. We've become so used to Mama in loose housedresses, we aren't even aware of her pregnancy until the afternoon she gets ready for the hospital. Even if we suspect something, it isn't a topic for conversation in our family.

"Dolly, I'll need you to take over until I get back," Mama says while she gathers a few personal items. "You're in charge and George is here to help." She gives me a pointed look, and I know what it means because of what happened two years ago.

Back then, when Paul was nearly two, Mama needed me to watch him while she kept a doctor's appointment. She put me in charge with George as my backup. Paul was still in diapers, and changing him was a challenge. That afternoon when he waddled over to me with his pants drooping down to his knees, I knew I couldn't put off the inevitable any longer.

I carried Paul to Mama's room and laid him on the bed, next to the dresser where she kept all his baby clothes. He wriggled his body, but I pressed one hand on his chest while I unpinned his soggy diaper. I called George to help me, but he answered with a grunt. Rather than wait, I turned my head for a minute to reach into the dresser drawer for a clean diaper. In that fleeting instant, Paul rolled off the bed and fell onto the floor, cutting his nose on the corner of the dresser. He screamed, and I yelled for George.

"George, come here quick," I cried out.

"Just a minute while I finish this page." He was reading his comic book and didn't think there was any urgency, even with Paul's cries which were now sniffling whimpers.

"Come now," I yelled, "there's blood."

That brought him in a hurry. When he saw the blood smeared on Paul's face and matting his curls, he took immediate action.

"We need to get him to St. Anne's right away. Quick, wrap him in a blanket and I'll hold a towel to his nose. C'mon, we have to hurry, he's bleeding a lot."

“Wait,” I cried, “we have to let Mary know.” I flew to the open window and called her in from the back yard. She came in sputtering, but when she saw the situation, she said, “Boy, are you gonna get it from Mama.”

“Never mind,” I snapped, “just take care of the others until we get back.”

George and I carried Paul between us, running and walking up the hill, across South Park to St. Anne’s Hospital, the very hospital where I hoped to train as a nurse when I graduated from high school. Would they remember this incident? My spirits sagged even further.

As soon as we reached Emergency, a nurse directed us to a table. She cleaned away some of the blood on Paul’s face, and said he would need stitches.

“Oh, no,” I groaned, imagining Mama’s face when she saw her baby with stitches on his perfect nose.

The nurse mistook my cry as concern for Paul and said, “Don’t worry, the doctor will give him something to make him sleepy. He won’t feel a thing.” She sized us up and asked, “Do you want to stay with your brother, or wait in the next room?”

“We want to stay with him,” I answered for both of us.

“Okay, you can each hold one of his hands but stay at this end of the table.”

The nurse was a blur of crisp white efficiency as she dabbed at Paul’s nose with a medicinal swab. The fumes made me queasy. When the doctor approached with his instruments, I started to sweat. I looked down at my baby brother, his lips quivering, lying helplessly on the table, and fainted.

When I awoke, there was a black line of stitches on Paul’s nose, the ends sticking up like a crawling insect. What would Mama say?

As upset as I was, a separate part of me noticed how thoughtful the nurse was in overlooking my poor judgment. It’s true I’m small for my age, and she may not have realized I was fourteen, but it was pure kindness that shone in her soft brown eyes when she asked, “Are you going to be okay?”

I knew I wanted to be that kind of nurse, and I wasn’t going to let a little faint stop me. I steadied myself at the edge of the table.

“I’m fine now. We can manage.”

She held out a bright red lollipop for Paul and was rewarded with a big, dopey grin. He clutched it in his hand as George picked him up.

As soon as we were outside, George and I exchanged furtive glances between us. Neither one of us could bear the burden of responsibility, so we carped at one another.

“Why did you take your eyes off him? You know he’s squirrely.”

“And why didn’t you come when I called the first time?”

He thought about that for a minute then assuaged his guilt and said, "Fine nurse you're going to make, passing out like that." I opened my mouth for a sharp retort, started, then stopped. My throat felt tight and dry. I was devastated.

Later that afternoon, when Paul woke up from his nap, I put him in his high chair and fed him a light snack. Every time my eyes fell on his nose, my stomach twisted inside. He was feeling better and smiled at me, which made me feel worse.

Soon enough, the moment I was dreading arrived. The kitchen door opened and Mama walked in, all smiles seeing her baby eating his snack. All of a sudden, she clutched her stomach, rushed towards us and said, "What's that black thing on the baby's nose?"

My face crumpled. I opened my mouth but the words wouldn't come. Mama soon realized they were stitches. She swooped Paul into her arms, and pressed him to her breast.

"Dolly, suppose you tell me what happened here."

Paul didn't know what to make of all the fuss but he basked in the attention. I wanted to disappear. But I gave an account of the incident, while Mama cooed over her baby and brushed his curls with her hand.

"Seems I can't leave you in charge even for a doctor's appointment."

My shoulders slumped. I had no answer.

But all that was two years ago. Today, as Mama gives me that look, I am older and much wiser. Paul is nearly four and out of diapers. There will be no accidents this time. When Mama tells me I'm in charge, I'm ready.

"You can count on me," I say to Mama. "Hurry, Papa's waiting."

The following morning, Papa tells us we have a new baby sister.

"Now that your mother has another baby to fuss over, maybe she'll be able to part with Paul's curls and let him grow up." I hear the undertone in Papa's words though his face is all smiles.

"What shall we name her?" I ask.

"Your mother said something about Pauline."

"Pauline!" I exclaim with dismay.

"Pauline," echoes Mary, "that's a terrible name."

The girl across the street is Pauline and we don't get along with her. What is Mama thinking?

"Tell Mama we'll come up with a name and not to do a thing until we do."

Papa shakes his head. "I'll tell her but you know how your mother is when she makes up her mind."

All day we try out different names, and finally agree on one that sounds more fifties and modern. When Papa is ready to leave for visiting hours at the hospital, we gather around him.

“Well, what’s your decision?” he asks, suppressing a smile.

“Carol Ann,” we shout in chorus. Even Teresa and Rita put in their two cents.

“Carol Ann Moniz Silva,” Papa tests the name on his tongue.

“No,” we clamor, “not Moniz, just Carol Ann.” We all have Mama’s maiden name as our middle name, and Mary and I think it is old-fashioned. We want this baby to have a modern name with a real American middle name, not a Portuguese name.

“I’ll tell your mother, but she’s pretty keen on Pauline Moniz.”

Mary lays her finger on her tongue and makes a retching sound behind Papa’s back. I totally agree with her. Papa pretends not to notice, and leaves to feed the chickens and check on his garden before going to the hospital. That evening, when Papa returns, we are waiting for him.

“Well, what did Mama say?” I ask.

“She says she’ll think about it.”

“Oh, no,” Mary says, “that’s what she always says when she means no.”

Papa chuckles but gives nothing away.

On June eighteenth, ten days after her birth, the baby comes home wrapped like a papoose in a light summer blanket. We crowd around Mama who sits by the kitchen table, and slowly unwraps the blanket.

“What shall we call her,” Mary asks as she gently strokes the tiny fingers and toes, not daring to look at Mama.

Mama sits very still for a moment then smiles.

“Do I really have a choice in the matter?” she asks teasingly. “Papa said I was overruled.”

We jump for joy, shouting, “Carol Ann, Carol Ann.”

“Sh-h-h,” Mama says, “you’ll wake the baby.”

She rewraps the tiny bundle, and lays her in the bassinette.

“I’m going to take a little rest now, while Carol Ann sleeps. Why don’t you all go out and play in the yard until I call you in.”

We love the sound of our new sister’s name, which has broken with tradition. Mama sighs. Maybe she has an inkling that this baby girl will always break with tradition.

In spite of her rest in the hospital, Mama looked tired. Her face was lined and damp with perspiration. In our ignorance we never gave a thought to the fact that Mama was nearly forty-four years old, and the mother of ten children. For us, a baby every few years was nothing new, just Mama's way of getting a vacation.

Tennis Lessons

With the arrival of the new baby, Mama relies on me more and more to help with the other children. Since my embarrassment in school, I pay more attention to personal hygiene and also instruct my sisters. George, who has switched from medical to dental school at Tufts, makes sure we brush our teeth regularly, but grooming is left to me.

I designate shampoo day, and ready the bathroom with a pan of warm water which I have heated on the stove. I rig the washboard across the tub and set the pan on top of it. Then I call my sisters in one by one to shampoo their hair. I start with Teresa, who is the most docile, while Mary corrals Rita.

“Lean over the tub and hold this washcloth over your eyes while I pour the water. I won’t let any soap get into your eyes, but you need to be careful with the cloth,” I caution.

Sometimes I miss, and there are yelps and flailing of hands to swat me, but for the most part my sisters are grateful for the attention. The smile that Rita gives me when I find a ribbon to tie the ends of her pigtails makes the effort all worthwhile. Afterwards, I feel a sense of pride and satisfaction in being helpful.

Yet I chafe at other duties that keep me indoors so much of the time. When I go on errands, I see my friends walking to the park or to the movies. The days of summer are passing swiftly, and I’ve yet to play tennis with Sheila. On a sleepy afternoon in July when the house is calm and Carol Ann is napping, I approach Mama.

“Do you think I could meet my friend Sheila sometime this week? She wants to teach me to play tennis.”

“I think that could be arranged,” she says, taking me completely by surprise. Mama’s face dissolves into a soft smile, and it encourages me to be more daring.

“Can I call her right now?”

“Yes, but don’t talk too long on the phone. You don’t want to tie up the party line.”

Sheila and I quickly agree on a date to begin my lessons. A few days later, we meet at South Park, and hit old tennis balls back and forth over a sagging net. We do more running than hitting the ball, but it is fun being outdoors in shorts and sneakers on a summer day.

When Mama gives me Sunday afternoon off, Sheila and I take a long walk to the Brightman Street Bridge. Her cousin Cathy comes along and the three of us

walk and talk, never noticing the miles. We take a picture with Cathy's Brownie camera and when it is developed, we label it the Day of Our Marathon Walk.

It is Sheila who teaches me to ride a two-wheeler bike. Between her house and St. Anne's Hospital is a flat stretch on a quiet street. Unless an ambulance comes roaring by, it is a good place to practice. Sheila runs alongside while I wobble on her blue Schwinn, complete with fenders and coaster brakes. I roll up the cuffs of my dungarees, grip the handle bars and fly, back and forth. The day she lets go of the seat and I balance on my own, is a day of exhilaration.

I look forward to these afternoons, and feel less resentful and grumpy when I am at home. Mama must notice the change in me because she seems to be loosening the strings.

One afternoon while playing tennis, I hit the ball too enthusiastically, and it sails out into the park. Two younger boys, who are hanging about, make a dash for it. We only have two balls, so I run after them.

"They're just little thugs," Sheila calls to my retreating figure, "you'll never get it back."

But I have experience with two older brothers and think I can talk them into returning it. When I come back to the court, holding the ball aloft in victory, Sheila asks, "How did you ever convince them?"

"I tried reasoning and when that didn't work, I told them my brother Joe was a Marine."

"Who's Joe?" she asks puzzled.

"Now that my brother Junior is in the Marines, he wants us to call him Joe. Besides, I didn't think the name 'Junior' packed quite the punch that 'Joe' did with those punks."

Sheila smiles. "You're something else," she says, and I see respect in her bright, blue eyes.

Even with the addition of the new baby, it was turning out to be a great summer.

Spiritual Fervor

That wonderful summer of tennis and biking came to an end in September of 1953. I was in my junior year at the Mount, and my sister Mary was starting her freshman year. Like me, she was the only student from her eighth grade graduating class. I played the big sister role and showed her around, but after a few weeks she was on her own. It wouldn't do to be seen with a freshman.

We rarely passed one another during the day, yet it was comforting to know we were at the same school. One area where we did meet was chapel, although we sat in separate sections. As an upperclassman I sat in reserved stalls up close to the altar, while Mary was relegated to the regular pews. As the classes filed in, I found myself watching for her.

I came to appreciate beginning my day with prayer, and especially enjoyed the hush and quiet of chapel on special feast days. The dark, carved wooden pews creaked and groaned with our restlessness. When my eyes strayed upwards, it seemed the arched ceilings ascended and vanished into the darkness of Heaven. I was dizzy with the smell of melting wax and piety, and began to think I might have a vocation.

I took notice of two sisters and studied what it was about them that I admired. Sr. Gertrude was masterful in Literature, holding our interest in **The Merchant of Venice**, mesmerizing us with her voice. In spite of ourselves, we became entranced with the story of Shylock. Her classes were stimulating, and she nurtured my love of words.

Sister Mary Verona, our music teacher, was tall, with beautiful teeth and cheeks the creamy color of the inside of a pear. She brought in her L.P. records and introduced us to opera. My heart swelled to the Triumphal March of **Aida** and felt the tragedy of Violetta in **La Traviata**. It was she who taught me to appreciate Mozart, and understand why Beethoven's music increased in volume as his hearing diminished.

I had been exposed to music all my life. Until the Firestone accident, Papa sang professionally and played guitar on the radio. He sang with me and my sisters in the church choir. From the age of ten I played the piano and later accompanied George at his violin recitals. But this music was like no other I had ever experienced. It was as if there existed a musical alphabet and I was only now learning to read.

I couldn't wait for music class. Sr. Verona would stand at the front of the room, hands clasped across her rounded bosom, until all eyes were on her. Once

she had our complete attention, she'd say, "Today we shall listen for the cellos, or violas, in this piece." And then she would carefully lift the arm of the record player, and gently touch the diamond needle to the spinning record. What followed was forty-five minutes of pure joy.

I began to consider what my life would be like if I entered the religious order. If it meant living in the Convent, prayers in chapel and access to great music, maybe I could endure the separation of my family. I kept these feelings hidden in my heart and applied myself to Latin, French, Trigonometry, Physics and Theology. I almost wished away Christmas vacation in order to return to music class, but the spirit of the holidays finally caught up with me.

On Christmas morning, there was a big box under the tree with my name on it. I started to tear the wrapping and Mama said, "Don't open that out here."

I was puzzled, but carried the gift to the parlor entry with Mary close at my heels. I closed the door and unwrapped the gift. It was a super-sized box of Kotex.

"Oh, thank goodness," I said, "I don't have to tear any more old sheets."

Not one to soft pedal her opinion, Mary sputtered, "She calls that a Christmas present?" and stomped out of the room.

I knew it wasn't wonderful like a new sweater or blouse, but I was pleased. It was as if Mama finally understood I was growing up and needed certain things. Mary still didn't have menstrual periods, so I was spared the dilemma of sharing. I don't like to admit that I somehow felt noble accepting Mama's gift. If I was disappointed, I could offer it up towards my Heavenly reward, as the sisters encouraged us to do. How smug I was, convinced that my attitude was a further sign of my spiritual calling. I was well on my way to sainthood.

Near the end of junior year when I am sixteen, I realize I need to find a job that pays more than the paper route. One Saturday when Mary and I do the weekly shopping on Main Street, I fill out applications at W.T. Grant's and Newberry's five-and-dime.

W.T. Grant has a money change system that would be fun to operate. The customer's sales slip and cash are placed into a canister that whizzes up to the ceiling through a network of wires, and into a room where a lady opens it, makes correct change then sends it zooming back. Sometimes, the lady peers through her

glassed-in office to make certain the pneumatic tube has returned. There's something ancient about her, as if she's been in her cubicle since the store opened. Though I wouldn't want her job, I'd sure like sending that canister back and forth.

On the other hand, Newberry's is a store where my friends are apt to shop for cosmetics and notions. If I got hired there, I could impress them with my new skills.

The decision is made for me when I am accepted at Newberry's to work as a soda jerk at the ice cream fountain. I learn to make lime-rickeys, a sweet summer drink; coffee cabs, a milkshake with ice-cream; and grilled cheese sandwiches. Banana splits are my specialty: the halved banana covered with three mounds of ice-cream, with pineapple, chocolate and strawberry syrup drizzled on top, then heaped with nuts, cherries and whipped cream topping. My friends think I'm lucky to work at a soda fountain, but the truth is you get tired of the same food.

That summer they hire a boy to wash dishes. I sneak looks at him as he works in the back room, but I'm so shy, I don't introduce myself. One day when I run short of metal containers for milkshakes, I venture back to his area.

"Hi, what do you need?" he asks over the noise and steam of the dishwasher.

"I'm nearly out of containers for milkshakes," I answer, noticing how cute he is with his fair hair and blue eyes.

"I'll have some ready in a minute, and bring them out to you," he says. "By the way, my name is Paul C." When he says his last name, it sounds familiar. I see the color rise in his cheeks and realize he is as shy as I am. It could be the heat from the hulking stainless steel dishwasher that makes him blush, but I don't think so, and it gives me courage.

"Do you have a sister Joan who goes to the Mount?" I ask.

"No I don't. Must be another family with the same name."

"Oh," I say, feeling a little flustered and tongue-tied. Before I completely lose my nerve, I quickly put out my hand and say, "My name is Dolly."

We shake hands and I notice his are red and soft from all that hot water. Paul smiles then says, "Well, I'd better get back. These dishes come through faster than I can keep up."

I get busy with the lunch crowd, and slide the metal containers on the pole so quickly, the milkshakes nearly spill over. My stomach feels mushy and my skin tingles. Is this what it's like being friends with a boy?

It's a draw as to who is more shy, but I notice Paul now comes to the fountain more frequently to check on my supply of containers and glasses. I feel my cheeks burn whenever he is near and wish I could calm myself. Maybe I'll get

used to working alongside him after a while. I'll have to ask Mary to stop by and check him out. She's not the least bit shy and won't hesitate with her opinion. But it won't matter what she says. I like this quiet boy. I may have to reconsider my call to the religious life.

Senior Year

It hardly seems possible that I'm in my senior year at the Mount. Though I no longer want to become a nun, I still enjoy the hushed atmosphere of chapel, where we assemble in September to begin our final year. The quiet shadows bring peace to my soul, which is often in turmoil.

The conflict over Paul's curls simmered all summer. Paul would be five in November and eligible to start Kindergarten in the fall. Mama reluctantly agreed to Paul's schoolboy haircut, and we all breathed a sigh of relief.

But that wasn't the only source of friction. We all knew Junior was getting early leave from the Marines to marry his girlfriend Rose, but we didn't know she was pregnant. Junior was twenty-one and Rose eighteen. Both parents thought they were too young, but given the situation there were no other options. The wedding was planned very quickly.

I have little recollection of the ceremony as I was in charge of Carol Ann, who at fifteen months was quite a handful. She and I walked back and forth in the rear of the Church while the bride and groom exchanged vows.

At the modest reception, we met Rose's parents for the first time. Their smiles were tight as we made our introductions. The only one beaming was Junior, who looked splendid in his uniform. Clustered together on his left shoulder, the Korean Battle Star and Purple Heart alongside the Sharp Shooter Medal looked impressive. Beside him stood Rose, tiny in her simple white dress, a tentative smile on her sweet face.

"I've got a job lined up in a shoe repair shop on Fountain Street for when I'm discharged next month," Junior said, hoping to see some sign of appeasement from his new in-laws. They perked up a little, giving him the courage to continue.

"Under the G.I. Bill, I can borrow money to buy a house, and I've arranged to finish my high school education. We're going to start out on the right foot."

I silently hoped Junior had matured enough in his four years of military service to follow through with his plans. As the newlyweds were about to leave, I saw Papa slip something into Junior's pocket. When the confetti was tossed at their retreating bodies, I imagined fairy dust and made a wish. It wasn't the best of circumstances, but we were all family and would do our part to make it work.

After the wedding, George returned to Boston to begin his first year in Dental School at Tufts. That was another source of contention during the summer. Mama so wanted a medical doctor in the family, but George held steady, saying he

had given it a lot of thought. He was eager to resume his studies, and seemed a lot happier with his decision to become a dentist.

Mary and I had our separate routines even though we attended the same school. She had known the path she would take ever since fourth grade. Back then, her teacher, Miss Monahan, rewarded the children's good behavior by singing and playing the piano. Mary wanted to be just like her. Now that she was in high school, she felt she wasn't as well prepared in English Literature as the girls from Saint Peter and Paul's. She took it upon herself to contact her former seventh grade English teacher, Miss Cuttle.

That contact was the beginning of weekly tutoring sessions for which Miss Cuttle charged not a dime. It was a wonderful time for Mary, and I suspect, Miss Cuttle, a single retired teacher. Long after Mary was in college and doing well, she would visit Miss Cuttle and share her successes. But now, as I saw their relationship deepen, the old green serpent of envy reared its ugly head. It took me a while to realize that Mary needed Miss Cuttle just as I needed Sheila's mom.

Lately, whenever I have the chance, I stop by Sheila's house, hoping her mom is home from teaching school. She always asks if I'd like some tea, and when I reply yes, she brings out two china cups and saucers. She places the pot on a small table between us, and we relax as if she has nothing else to do.

"Tell me about your remarkable mother and all your brothers and sisters," she says while pouring tea. I want to tell her everything, but find myself editing what I say. I tell her about George changing from medicine to dentistry, but don't mention Mama's disappointment. I share my dream of being a nurse at Saint Anne's Hospital, and how I will be taking the qualifying exam in a few months.

"Your family is amazing. Your parents have one son in college, and you girls are getting such a good education. How do they manage it?"

I want to tell her about the bologna sandwiches we eat day after day, but that would be disloyal. Mama has instilled in us that what goes on at home is private. I talk about my job at Newberry's and the paper route and how we all work together.

"I give your parents a lot of credit," she says with a smile. If she only knew of the chaos that goes on in our home. I tell her all the surface news and eliminate the arguments. If Sheila resents my time with her mother, she never shows it. She sits on the sidelines, quietly present, allowing me to be the center of attention in the warmth of her kitchen.

In the early spring of 1955, I'm scheduled to take the test at St. Anne's Hospital for acceptance into their nursing program. I feel confident about my ability to pass the test, but leave nothing to chance. One afternoon before class, I quickly slip into the empty classroom. I head towards the corner niche where the statue of the Blessed Virgin stands. After a quick glance to see that no one is in the room, I place my rosary beads over her folded hands. Then I sit in my seat and open a book, keeping an eye on my classmates as they enter the room. No one seems to notice the addition to the statue, and I breathe a sigh of relief. That Saturday, I take the test with a light heart.

About two weeks later, the letter arrives. Mama greets me at the door, holding an envelope in her hands. I see the hospital logo in the corner of the envelope and reach out for it. I hesitate a moment, then tear it open. My eyes scan the first sentence and I jump for joy.

"Let me see," Mama says, and she takes the letter and sits down at the kitchen table to read it. When she reaches the end, she says, "Well, you've wanted to be a nurse ever since Miss Harrington has been making baby visits to this house. And now it looks as if your wish will come true." I stand there, speechless, with a grin on my face.

"You must be very happy. I know I am." And in that moment, my heart softens towards Mama. I didn't think she paid much notice to what I wanted.

When Papa comes home from work, Mama removes the letter from her apron pocket and holds it out to him. He carefully slides out a chair next to Carol Ann who sits under the table, playing with a plastic horse. He absently ruffles her hair then takes the letter. Carol Ann looks up with huge hazel eyes but continues with her imaginary game. Papa takes his time reading the letter and when he finishes, he looks at me and says, "I always knew you were a smart girl."

I feel their love and pride in my accomplishment. Joy explodes inside me and I reach down to Carol Ann, who at 20 months is much too serious a child. I slide my arms around her soft body and twirl her in the air. Still grasping the horse, she gives me a startled look then bursts out in a giggle, delighted at the unexpected attention.

After the weekend, I return to school to hear that three classmates have also been accepted into the nursing program at St. Anne's. Orientation is scheduled for summer and the four of us make plans to attend together. My life seems to be falling into place and I begin to relax more at school.

Two weeks later on a Saturday morning, Papa asks me to accompany him while he collects the rents on our properties. He generally goes alone, while Mary and I do the weekly grocery shopping. But on this day he tells Mama that it's time I become familiar with the routine, so that I can cover for him when he has to work on a Saturday. That makes sense to me, so I never suspect he has an ulterior motive.

The properties are on Tecumseh and Warren Streets, about two miles from home. As we walk, Papa wastes no time getting to the topic on his mind.

"You're pretty excited about going to nursing school, aren't you?" he asks.

"Yes, Papa. It's what I've planned all my life, to be a nurse."

"So, you would be disappointed if you didn't go to St. Anne's."

"What do you mean?" I ask. I can't imagine where this is going. I have no other options.

"Well, Firestone is offering a scholarship to the children of its employees. There will be a test given nationwide, and the winners will get a full four-year scholarship to the college of their choice. I think you should take the test. You have a good chance of winning. What do you think of that?"

College! I halt in the middle of the road as if struck by a lightning bolt. With his hand on my back, Papa gently guides me across the street but remains silent. Just when I think my life's path is settled, Papa opens the door of opportunity even wider. In our neighborhood, I know only one boy going to college and definitely no girls. Yet I have nothing to lose by taking the test. My rosary beads still hang on the hands of the Blessed Virgin Mary. My place at St. Anne's is secure. Thoughts swirl in my head and before I know it, we are at the first tenant's door.

Papa knocks and a tall lady with a scarf covering her curlers, answers.

"Oh, hello Mr. Silva. I see you have a helper today," she says.

"This is my oldest daughter Dolly, Mrs. Landry. She may be collecting rents from time to time and I wanted you to meet her."

She gives me a polite but perfunctory smile then turns her attention back to Papa.

"Just a minute while I get the book and the rent money."

She hurries into the bedroom, and brings out a small note book where Papa writes down the amount and signs off. He pockets the bills and hands the book back to her.

"And how's everything going? Any more problems with the kitchen sink?"

“It works just fine. No more dripping faucet.” Mrs. Landry turns to me and says, “Your father is so handy. He can fix anything.”

I smile at Papa in acknowledgment. It feels good to know his work is appreciated. We say good-bye and proceed upstairs to the second and third floors where the routine is repeated.

Papa has an easy manner with the tenants. He takes the time to speak with each family and I can see they enjoy his company. Especially Mrs. Ferraz, an old friend who came to America on the same boat with Papa, and is now widowed. Her English is very broken, and it isolates her from the other tenants. Papa asks about her son, and her melancholy face lights up. Mrs. Ferraz tells us to sit and she offers us soda to drink. Papa gives Mrs. Ferraz a little extra time, but after a few stories of the old country, he tells her we must go. She touches my face lightly and says a few words in Portuguese. I don’t understand them, but I feel her kindness.

After collecting the remainder of the rents, we head for home. I have been so interested in all the families, I’ve managed to put aside Papa’s suggestion that I try for the Firestone Scholarship. But now it comes back to me in full force, and I think about the possibility. It’s definitely worth a try, and I tell Papa my decision.

“That’s my girl,” he says. “I’ll pick up the paperwork on Monday and get the ball rolling.”

Firestone Scholarship

One morning towards the end of March, Sr. Mary Carmela, the Principal, calls me to her office. As I walk down the hall, I wonder. Have I defaced the statue of Mary with my rosary beads, and has she somehow found out they are mine? The palms of my hands feel sweaty.

When I reach her office, I hear a man's voice, which is most unusual. It must be the Monsignor discussing plans for graduation. I knock on the door, which stands slightly ajar. Sr. Carmela, who is expecting me, opens it all the way. Imagine my surprise when I see Papa, still in his work clothes, standing beside Sr. Carmela. I notice another gentleman standing there as well, and he's not the Monsignor. Everyone is smiling, especially Papa.

"Step inside, Ines, we have something to tell you." In those days, nicknames were not used, so I was Ines in school and Dolly everywhere else.

"I want you to meet this gentleman who is from the *Fall River Herald News*. He's here to take pictures of you and your father for the newspaper. We just received word. You have won the Firestone Scholarship." Sister's voice had an unusual lilt to it. She shook hands with me and said, "Congratulations. We are all very proud of you."

I looked at Papa who flashed me a smile and nodded his head in agreement.

Sr. Carmela was a beautiful nun, with eyes the color of a glittery swimming pool on a summer's day. As students, we stood in awe of her haughty manner. Today, her pink cheeks blossomed out of her white coif, and she beamed golden rays upon me that felt like a mantle of warmth. It was a side of her I never imagined.

Papa and I posed for pictures in her office, and then she said I could take the rest of the day off. She said she would be making a special announcement to the class tomorrow, but I would probably want to be with my family right now. We shook hands all around, and I floated out of school in a daze, Papa at my side. I don't know what felt more unreal; winning a scholarship that would change the course of my life, or leaving school early with Sr. Carmela's permission.



Firestone Scholarship Awarded---Papa Looks On

Much of the rest of that day is hazy, but I do recall our walk home, passing by St. Louis Church and Papa saying, "Let's stop inside for a few minutes and give thanks for this wonderful gift."

I was surprised. Papa always tipped his hat when he passed a church, but he never stepped inside to kneel and pray except for Sunday Mass. I began to realize what a momentous day this was. I wondered what thoughts went through Papa's mind, as he blessed himself and knelt in a rear pew. I slid in beside him. Slanting rays of sunshine fell on his bowed head. In spite of the sun, I shivered. I closed my eyes and prayed for guidance.

When we arrived home, Mama was astonished. No one had thought to call her with the news. Papa described the amazing day in detail, only leaving out the part where he suggested we stop in church to pray. He told her our picture would be in the paper, and she was speechless. She drew a handkerchief from her apron pocket and touched a corner of her eye. Not being a family to demonstrate affection, we each responded individually, and yet it was a shared moment of joy.

Once the pictures came out in the newspaper, Papa became a minor celebrity, at work and in the neighborhood. He carried the official letter in his pocket, and said to anyone who would listen, "Only in America does the daughter of a Portuguese immigrant get the opportunity to go to college. God bless America. God bless Mr. Firestone"

Long forgotten was the terrible Firestone accident that took Papa's hand. Long forgotten were his lost radio career, and the silent guitar. Long forgotten were the years of rehabilitation with a clumsy prosthesis, and the struggles of physically demanding jobs.

Papa always said there's no free lunch, and it seemed my college tuition was exacted on that cutting room floor. In some way, this scholarship became a small token honoring his fighting spirit. He never gave up, and his determination and courage made the impossible, possible. Would I be worthy of his sacrifice? Could I fulfill Papa's faith in me? I carried these thoughts in my heart, and silently promised to make him proud.

The following week, all six winners from around the states were pictured in the newspaper. I was one of two from the state of Massachusetts. When we stopped at the bakery for jelly donuts after church on Sunday, it seemed the entire Portuguese community celebrated with us.

"Looks like I'm going to have to break down and buy a reliable car to take my girl to college" Papa boasted to the gathering crowd.

I hadn't thought of our needing a better car. Up until now, we walked everywhere except for Sunday drives and short trips to the properties. Where would Papa find the extra money? I was filled with excitement for the future, but also overwhelmed with a feeling of great responsibility.

Suddenly I had to think about what college I wanted to attend. Representatives from the scholarship committee recommended Smith or Vassar, two outstanding colleges in Massachusetts, but I chose a small women's college in Newport, Rhode Island. Salve Regina College had an excellent academic record, a baccalaureate program in nursing --and the final clincher-- it was run by the Sisters of Mercy, the same sisters who guided me through four years of high school.

Though I would never share the light camaraderie with the sisters as did many of my classmates, I began to blossom with their attention. I wasn't as shy, and recognized their dedication to making me be all that I could be.

In the fall, for the very first time, I would be living away from the familiar. Without my noticing it, the Sisters of Mercy had become my security blanket, the umbilical cord that would connect my old life with the new. It was clear to me I would be comfortable at Salve. It was a decision I never regretted.

Senior Prom

Somewhere between the excitement of the Firestone Scholarship and the stirring sentiments of graduation, I had to make a decision about attending my senior prom. I lay awake nights, thinking about who I could ask. The school halls buzzed with talk of boyfriends and going steady, but I had never been a part of that, not being allowed to date.

Who did I know? I sorted through the slim possibilities. There was Anthony from Sheila's Halloween party, but he was too pushy and I remembered his rubbery lips. Sheila's brother Eric was cute and I had a crush on him, but that was out of the question. Even if I was brave enough to ask, what if he turned me down and it ruined my friendship with my best friend?

When I moaned to Mama about the prom, she couldn't understand my problem.

"If you want to go so bad, ask someone," she said.

"But who?" I whined. "You never let me date, and I don't know any boys."

"If you really want to go, you'll think of something." I was exasperated with the simplicity of her logic.

Finally in desperation, I decided to ask Paul C., the dishwasher at my weekend job at Newberry's. I gathered up my courage and went into the kitchen where he was stacking dishes. Before my daring evaporated, I blurted out the question. He stood still for a moment, then his cheeks turned pink, his blue eyes smiled and he said "yes." I floated through the rest of the afternoon, stealing quick glances at him but avoiding any more conversation.

When I got home that evening, I told Mama the problem of my prom date was solved. "I knew it," she said smugly.

"Don't you even want to know who it is?"

"I trust you to choose wisely." How could she be so calm when I was filled with anxiety, and butterflies fluttered in my stomach? Didn't she understand anything?

The very next day at school, I told Sheila who I had invited to the prom.

"Oh," she said, "his sister Joan is in our class. She's very nice. Maybe you two can double"

"No, it's not the same family."

"Oh, too bad." She flashed her blue eyes at me and asked, "Is he cute?"

"Kinda."

"Kinda? Is that why your cheeks are so red?" And we both laughed.

Mama surprises me one evening as I'm finishing up my homework when she asks, "Have you thought about what you're going to wear to the prom?"

"I've been a little worried about that because I know the white dress for graduation is an expense."

"You leave the worrying to me. This weekend Cherry and Webb is having a sale. I think we should take a look." My mouth drops open in surprise.

"Better be careful," she says with a deadpan face, "a fly could buzz in that gaping hole."

My mother, making a joke! My world was spinning out of control, but it was a wonderful topsy-turvy feeling. I went to bed that night and slept peacefully for the first time in weeks.

We ended up choosing a pink taffeta short-sleeved confection with chiffon over the skirt. I would wear a stiff crinoline underneath the ballerina length to pouf it out. I thought back to the limp, yellow hand-me-down I wore to my eighth grade prom, and reveled in the crispness of this new dress. It even smelled new.

The evening of the prom, Paul came to my home with a wrist corsage of baby roses that perfectly matched my dress. Now I understood his curiosity about my dress, one day at work. Mary helped me with my hair and I wore it in a pageboy. We stopped at Paul's home to take pictures. In my low, white heels, a more practical version of glass slippers, I felt like Cinderella going to the Ball.

You would think I would remember an evening that celebrated my first date as well as my Senior Prom. But it all floats in my head like a kaleidoscope of music and color. It was as if in going through the agonizing steps of arranging a first date, I could now put that aside and move on to more important things. My mind was already forging ahead to the dance of life.

Graduation

With the prom over, Mama and I focus on graduation day. Since the style of the white dress is determined by the Sisters, there is no worry of one girl's dress overshadowing the others. All we have to do is have it tailored to my size. With alterations completed, it now hangs on the back of the parlor door with a protective sheet over it. I touch it reverently each evening before I go to sleep. I know Mary peeks at the dress when I'm not there, because she shows no interest in it when I'm at home. In two years, she will graduate and the Sisters will again choose the class style. It will of course, be white.

And then graduation day arrives. My classmates and I, garlands of red roses on our heads, carry a floral spray as we process into the oldest Catholic Church in Fall River, St. Mary's Cathedral on Second Street. We are all in white like brides of Christ. When it is my turn to walk up the aisle and receive my diploma from Bishop Connolly, I take my time as we have practiced, then kneel before him to kiss his ring. For a fleeting moment I think about all the germs on his ring, but I stifle that thought and beam when he hands me my diploma. I glide back to my seat with a full heart.

After the ceremony, graduates and family gather outdoors. With his Brownie camera, Papa snaps the sea of billowing white dresses and red roses against the blue sky. We are like snowy egrets, fluttering about before taking flight. This family milestone is recorded in black and white, but my memories are in vivid color.

Papa calls to Mama, "Agnes, get in the picture with your Miss MacWilliam bonnet." Mama adjusts the stylish brim of her new summer hat and smiles indulgently. Papa always teases Mama and calls her Miss MacWilliam when she is dressed special.

Two year old Carol Ann twines her fingers in Mama's hand, and Papa snaps another picture. He is nearly bursting his suspenders with pride, and I feel the joy and exhilaration of family.

I mill about between classmates, not wanting this moment to end. Then Mary takes me aside. "Why did you all kneel to kiss the bishop's ring like he's some kind of royalty?" she asks with disdain in her voice.

"He's the emissary of God and we show our respect."

"Well, you won't catch me doing that when I graduate. I'm going to shake his hand." I laugh out loud at her boldness.

“Oh no you won’t, Mary. You’ll kneel and kiss his ring and love every minute of it.”

She wrinkles up her pert nose and swishes her skirt away from me. “We’ll see about that.”

Epilogue

Looking back over the years I can perfectly understand my decision to go to Salve Regina, the fledgling but highly respected women's college run by the Sisters of Mercy. It was in Newport, Rhode Island close to home, yet far enough that I would be living away from my family for the first time.

True to his word, Papa bought a newer car to drive me to college, a green 1939 Plymouth. Like the old beater car, the steering wheel was adapted with a knob to accommodate driving with one hand, and he became very familiar with the 25 mile stretch from Fall River to Newport. On the weekends he came for me, he would wait down by the ocean with a bucket, and collect those small snails called periwinkles. When we reached home, Mama would boil them up in seasoned water, and we would feast on them along with buttered corn and tomatoes from the garden.

Sister Mary Martina, the Administrator at Salve, was warm and welcoming. She did all in her power to see that my scholarship covered all financial matters, so that I could concentrate on my studies. I sensed her personal interest in my welfare, and her faith in my ability to succeed. I felt safe, secure and prepared for the challenges ahead.

Salve Regina was a mansion-- neighbor to the Breakers-- modestly referred to by Newport Society as a "summer home" and lovingly described in **The Great Gatsby**. When I first stepped into my living accommodations, a huge room in Ochre Court, I was awed at the beauty and spaciousness of my shared bedroom, aptly called-- Stella Matutina--Morning Star. From my window, I could view and hear the roaring Atlantic Ocean. The Cliff Walk was steps away.

My room had been divided to accommodate six students. Three sets of beds lined the walls on opposite sides, and three sets of desks--back to back-- defined the center of the room. At one end, an open door led to a common bathroom with several stalls and sinks. The room was neat and orderly with space for everyone. For the first time in my life I had my own bed, my own dresser and my own desk. Once a week, clean sheets magically appeared at the foot of my bed, without my having to wash or iron them.

The few clothes I owned fit easily into the closet and small dresser. A simple lamp lit the corner of the desk where I read Mama's letters, a few with a folded dollar bill tucked inside. The fact that I shared this room with five other girls and their desks, beds and dressers, never diminished the joy I felt in my corner section of that room. What was hardship and deprivation for these young women of

privilege was luxury to me. While I was amused by cries of, “How can they expect us to fit all our clothes in this tiny closet?” I inwardly exulted in having more personal space than I had ever claimed before.

I couldn’t wait to visit the bookstore to select the books I would need for classes, all paid for by the Firestone Scholarship. I looked forward to meeting my roommates and beginning my studies. It never occurred to me that much of what I would learn in the next four years would not be contained in those books.

Like a skipping pebble changes the calm surface of the water with interconnecting ripples, the influence of this college would be felt by everyone in my family, some more than others. Papa launched the first pebble when he crossed the ocean to come to America with dreams of a better life. You be the judge of his success.

George opened his dental office on August 1, 1960 on North Main St. As he was able and of his own accord, he fully repaid his college expenses so that his younger brothers and sisters might have their chance to attend college. Papa advised him to buy in the north end of town where there were no dentists, because he didn't believe in renting property or in professional partnerships. Papa said, "Partners are for dancing."

Junior (Joe) and Rose had two sons, but that marriage, so shaky from the start, didn't last long. Divorce would touch some of the rest of us as well, but his was the first with the greatest impact. He married again and tried a number of ventures. After working towards a license in Real Estate, he bought properties in Massachusetts and Florida. He became successful and eventually settled in Tennessee.

I (Dolly) graduated from Salve Regina College (now Salve Regina University) in 1959 with an R.N. and B.S. degree. My first job was as a Visiting Nurse in Fall River, just as I always dreamed. Like my role model, Miss Harrington, I wore a blue and white pin-striped uniform with a perky sailor's cap on my head, and carried a black bag. My patients lived close by, which was fortunate, as I didn't own a car. I arranged visits so that I arrived home about lunch time. Living at home had its advantages, not the least of which was the expert advice Mama gave me regarding colicky babies, and how to converse with Portuguese immigrants, as my knowledge of that language was limited.

Mary graduated from Salve Regina College and earned a Masters in Guidance and Counseling from Rhode Island College in 1969. She went on to Boston College and studied for a Masters in English, but was called back home before she could complete it. For forty years she taught math, delighting her students on occasion by breaking out in song, when needed to emphasize a point or two. She was indeed following in the footsteps of her fourth grade teacher. Her students loved her and came back to visit, just as she had returned to visit Miss Cuttle, her seventh grade English teacher.

Teresa attended Cardinal Cushing College in Brookline, Massachusetts for a year then entered the religious community of the Sisters of Mercy. She graduated from Salve Regina College in 1965 with a degree in sociology. After teaching for five years, she went on to Columbia University to earn a Masters of Science in Therapeutic Recreation in 1972, and later in 1988, a Bachelor's degree in Physical Therapy from the University of New England. As of the printing of this book, she is employed as a physical therapist in a hospital in Taunton, Massachusetts.

- Rita** followed in my footsteps and became a Licensed Practical Nurse, eventually settling in California. Her childhood polio never slowed her down and she traveled across much of the United States. Today she dances, does yoga, water aerobics and whatever else her community offers in the way of physical activity. She wears all kinds of ordinary shoes but does need a wedge to compensate for the shortened calf muscle.
- Larry** earned a degree in Business Management from Johnson and Wales College in 1981, and dabbled for a while in real estate before taking a job with the post office. He was a pioneer in using windmills on his property in Massachusetts to provide a natural energy source. He left Massachusetts for Florida, and continued with the post office until his retirement in 2001. He remains in Florida where the warm climate is more comforting to an old ankle injury sustained in the Army.
- Margaret** earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth in 1969. She minored in education, but her interest lies in art. Several of her illustrations appear in this book. She left Massachusetts when her husband was transferred but is optimistic about returning there when he retires. At present she lives in upstate New York and uses her artistic skills in her beautiful flower gardens.
- Paul**, a self taught musician, attended Bristol Community College from 1967-1969 as a history major. He left college for the Army but was honorably discharged because of poor vision. Today he lives in Swansea, Massachusetts and volunteers his time giving piano and guitar lessons to the children of friends and neighbors. He also owns and manages a rooming house in Fall River.
- Carol Ann** is a Renaissance woman. She graduated from Swain School of Design in New Bedford, Massachusetts and taught art. She resides on a forty-acre farm in Tiverton, Rhode Island and is experienced in animal husbandry, architecture, the designing and installation of septic systems, stained glass, quilting, and carpentry. She was the baby sister we all doted upon, and she grew up to live her dreams.

Though Mama and Papa are now deceased, their legacy lives on in their ten children, thirty-two grand-children and thirty-nine great-grandchildren.

“The most extraordinary thing in the world is an ordinary man and an ordinary woman and their ordinary children.” G.K. Chesterton



Joe Jr., George
Mary, Teresa, Mama, Papa, Rita, Dolly
Larry, Margie, Carol Ann, Paul

Lineage

Agnes Pimental Moniz Silva (Mama) b. 8-8-1909 d. 8-19-1998

Joseph Soares Silva (Papa) b. 6-24-1909 d. 8-20-1993

George (11-21-1931)

3 children, 2 grandchildren

Joseph Jr.(5-26-1933)

10 children, 17 grandchildren

Dolly (11-24-1937)

3 children, 8 grandchildren

Mary (5-20-1939)

1 child, 2 grandchildren

Teresa (4-10-1941)

Religious Sister of Mercy

Rita (8-15-1944)

3 children, 4 grandchildren

Larry (9-6-1945)

2 children, 1 grandchild

Margaret (8-28-1947)

2 children, 1 grandchild

Paul (11-25-1949)

5 children, 1 grandchild

Carol Ann (6-8-1953)

3 children, 3 grandchildren



Margie, Larry, Carol Ann



Paul, Carol Ann



Rita, George, Teresa



Carol Ann, Margie

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